Whiskey Witches

Author's Edition

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Whistling Book Press
Alaska

Whistling Book Press

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Foreword

This is the Author's Edition. This particular book has gone through a wealth of variations as I've experimented with different mediums and publishing formats. The story itself has stood strong against the test of time.

I hope you enjoy!

Contents

Dedication

1. Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

3. Chapter 3

4. Chapter 4

5. Chapter 5

6. Chapter 6

7. Chapter 7

8. Chapter 8

9. Chapter 9

10. Chapter 10

11. Chapter 11

12. Chapter 12

13. Chapter 13

14. Chapter 14

15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16

17. Chapter 17

18. Chapter 18

19. Chapter 19

20. Chapter 20

21. Chapter 21

22. Chapter 22

23. Chapter 23

24. Chapter 24

25. Chapter 25

26. Chapter 26

27. Chapter 27

28. Chapter 28

29. Chapter 29

30. Chapter 30

31. Chapter 31

32. Chapter 32

33. Chapter 33

34. Chapter 34

35. Chapter 35

36. Chapter 36

37. Chapter 37

38. Chapter 38

39. Chapter 39

40. Chapter 40

41. Chapter 41

42. Chapter 42

43. Chapter 43

44. Chapter 44

45. Chapter 45

46. Chapter 46

47. Chapter 47

48. Chapter 48

49. Chapter 49

50. Chapter 50

51. Chapter 51

52. Chapter 52

53. Chapter 53

54. Chapter 54

55. Chapter 55

56. Chapter 56

57. Chapter 57

58. Chapter 58

Also By

About Author

DEDICATION

To those who love people
who can't find it in themselves to love you back.
Don't think less of yourself.
You will find someone.
They're out there.
It might be a friend.
It could be a coworker.
It doesn't matter, but stop investing in people
unwilling to give back to you without a purchase.
You know what I'm talking about.
You're worth so much more.

Chapter 1

Hard-packed dirt floor.

Symbols painted on the old wood wall of the restored slave cabin at the victim's feet. More were carved on the east wall.

A protection mandala chiseled into the wall at the victim's head just under the single window.

Nothing here screamed occult. These were just symbols and were all rather random. There wasn't a cohesive placement. The rune for great energy, for example, was next to the rune for death, which was spliced with prosperity that had been thrown in next to a symbol that meant absolutely nothing but could be found on fan art from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. What exactly was this guy's message?

He wanted attention. That's what the message was. "I hate it to say it, Chief, but I think this guy is out for kicks." But even morons could get something right sometimes.

"This seems pretty extreme for kicks," Chief Brian White said crisply.

He'd reached out to her asking for help on this case because the killer had left what could be occult symbols at the two previous murder sites. After the Pilmner case in Texas over five years ago, she'd become rather famous. She could track down serial killers who sacrificed people to raise demons.

However, that case had fallen into a weird gap of missing memories, and she couldn't recall what she'd been tracking or why. She'd read the case file. Of course she had. She'd read her notes, but nothing in there had given her any clues on how she'd finally caught him.

She'd looked at the pictures Chief White had sent to her and had initially said no. She wasn't interested in digging into a case outside her

jurisdiction—St. Francisville, Louisiana was far from Denver, Colorado—but her boss had told her to take a vacation. He wasn't her biggest fan.

Since she was here anyway, she could at least do her job and assist. The victim was male, early to mid-thirties, Hispanic, naked except for a pair of boxers. Someone had carved on his body. She slipped on one of her powdered gloves in the Louisiana heat and knelt beside the victim's head. "What do we know about him?"

"Eddie Lopez," the chief said, kneeling on the other side of the victim near his shoulder. "Good guy. Owned the lumber store. Wife. Two kids."

"Picket fence too?" How did the chief see Eddie's place in the community?

"You laugh, but yeah."

Eddie's was the sort of bad luck that had led her to looking into the existence of a nearby coven. They weren't all bad, but she could tell when a group of "witches" gathered to better their luck because others would lose theirs. There were ways to keep that from happening, but they usually involved a lot of work, which most newbie covens didn't know.

Paige had found what she thought was a coven, though it was hard to tell from Denver. The internet was a powerful tool, but it still only told so much. From what she could tell, there were about four witches in the circle? Maybe? But she also suspected they were the targeted victims.

Eddie Lopez hadn't been on the list of potential witches, so how had *he* caught the killer's eye?

"The store hasn't been doing so great lately. There aren't many people renovating their houses, I guess. But it was still doing well enough. His daughter's in soccer."

Her heart twisted with pain and grief the way it always did when someone mentioned children. She pushed that aside and focused. She didn't have kids and probably never would. She didn't want to see the

type of mother she'd be. She preferred to focus on work.

The killer had carved an X over each of the victim's eyes. Bruising around the point of incision and the trails of dried blood indicated the man's heart had still been beating.

Well, whoever the killer was, he didn't mind watching his victims suffer.

Eddie's wrists were clean, with no ligature marks. He hadn't been bound. Or at least, he hadn't struggled. Did that mean he'd been drugged? He'd allowed this to happen or passed out?

The toxicology report would tell them what was in his system, but she was willing to bet there'd be nothing there, same as the first two.

"This is new." Paige stared at the victim's chest, careful not to touch it. "Did he carve symbols on the other victims?"

"Not like this. Does it mean anything?"

Only if the killer knew what he was doing or thought he did. "I don't know. They're runes."

"I couldn't make any of them out," Chief White said. "My mam had a book, so I looked."

"You had time for that?"

He looked at her and tipped his black, bald head to the side with a frank look. "I brought all her old books to my office. When Marge sent me the picture, I looked while I had time."

Which meant he wasn't afraid of where this investigation might go. That was good, but it also meant that he might invite it to go where it didn't make sense. "Well, these are spliced together, which could mean he meant to give them more power."

"Okay." The chief frowned. "What kind of power?"

"This one," Paige said, pointing to one like a diamond cut in half and then offset, "is Jera, the rune for rewards arriving at their rightful time. This one," she said, pointing to one that looked like the Jesus fish, only

standing up, “Is Opala. It means heritage.”

“What could that mean?”

She wasn’t done. “There’s more. This is Fehu.” The two-branched, lopsided tree was separated from the rest and lower on the chest. “It means wealth and new beginnings.” She shifted, trying out to make out others. “Jera shares a line with Lagaz. It means intuition, which is spliced together with Ehwaz, which represents abrupt change.

“What does Jera mean?”

“Harvest.” More sprang out. “This one’s victory in battle. This one’s time of change.”

“That… means something.”

“Are you hoping or are you telling me?”

He pulled the corners of his lips down as if to remind her nonverbally that he was still the chief of police. “He’s a serial killer. He has a reason. Something in here must tell us what the reason is.”

“Unless he’s playing with us.” There was a very high likelihood that was the case. If she believed the killer wasn’t stupid, she’d say he was killing these people to inherit their rewards quickly to bring about new wealth. Further, she’d also conclude that he’d chosen to carve these symbols into Eddie while the man was still alive to provide more power to the runes. Fear and pain held a lot of energy.

“Do you think he is?”

Paige twisted on the balls of her feet and surveyed the walls again with a new perspective. What if someone threw up the stupid symbols to mask their actual knowledge of what they were doing? Slide-stepping closer to the wall at the victim’s head, she traced a few lines of the mandala, then a few of the other runes carved into the walls.

“You find something?” the chief asked.

“No. There are simply too many bad symbols thrown in with real ones. This is from *Supernatural*. I mean, come on. That’s just pop

culture."

"Do you have any ideas?"

Turning in a slow circle, she shook her head. "I think we've got someone trying to be cool and thinking he's summoning something."

"Like a demon?"

She bounced her head from side-to-side, trying to figure out what she really thought. "That's typically what we think of when we say summoning."

"You think it's a man?" Chief White asked, his voice lower.

"Probably. Statistics say it's more than likely. Also, each person was killed separately. If the killer is summoning, that could replace the sexual drive most serial killers have in common."

"Paige," a deep, thickly accented voice said.

She looked over at the chief. "What?"

His eyebrows rose. "What?"

"You said my name."

"I didn't." He looked around, narrowing his brown eyes.

She cocked her head to the side and listened. Someone outside? The officer she saw through the door shifted his weight from one foot to the other. She only saw the elbow of the other officer.

"Did you hear something?" the chief asked.

"You didn't?"

He shook his head.

Licking her lips, her heart picked up a beat. "Probably just the heat. It was a long drive." But what if it wasn't?

He grunted.

What if something else had tried calling her?

She chased that thought away quickly. Her family were witches, but she wasn't. She didn't hear voices or have magick. She followed clues like the mandala. They *could* be used in spells. Each symbol added to the

series of circles could bring new meaning to it. It was complicated spell work, rarely used, especially if someone had limited time. And they were weak, as far as spells went. A lot of work for little pay, which was another reason they were typically only used for protection.

Could it be used to protect a summoner against a demon, though? Maybe?

She scooted her foot forward for a better look but tripped, catching herself against the wall with her non-gloved hand.

The world rotated with a slow-churning lurch. The dust-ridden sunlight streaming through the slats in the window above her head dissolved into nothingness. Brutal heat transformed to bone-setting chill.

Everything disappeared. Something slammed into her skull from the side. Pressure built inside her head until she thought her eyes would pop out.

Silence.

Stillness.

Peace.

The moon hid behind a thick blanket of clouds. Fog rolled in and gently away only to fold itself around her again. Trees rose from the earth like prickly fingers. The ground lay dormant beneath her bare feet.

She pulled her black cloak tighter around her. Her earthbound form did not feel chill or heat, was unfazed by a strong wind. She felt the energy, the tug towards darkness. Her demon heart froze in fear.

No. She wasn't a demon. She was Paige Whiskey.

The fog lifted barely enough to allow her sense of self to realize she wasn't the demon. It felt like it, though. The sights. The smells. She saw them. She smelled them.

A pentacle had been drawn in salt in the short, springy grass nearby. Candles lit each point of the star. A small cauldron reigned in the center.

"Witch," the male voice from earlier said.

Fear overtook her. She turned to run, to flee.

Soul-fire burned the side of her face.

She staggered backward. A magickal ward glistened in the air directly in front of her. *The witch.*

Wait. What witch?

Trapped.

Trapped by what? And why?

Protect it.

Protect what?

Something gleamed in the grass. An old and twisted knot-work of metal lay on the ground. Weak energy shot out like the light of a distant star. The key.

The key. The thought took hold of her mind like claws and gripped her tight. *The key. Protect the key!*

Hands grabbed her. Warm. Soft.

Real.

She was stuck in a memory. A demon tied to the earth. She couldn't move. This wasn't her world. This wasn't her dimension. She belonged somewhere else, not here. The witch and the angel had chained her to this spot, helpless to keep the gates closed. She had to find a way out, had to get away. She had—

Wait. She had to know. She let the memory reel through again.

Fleeting images of white wings. Wings so white they almost glowed in the darkness of the night. Fingers. Fingers blackened from sacrificing others for gain. Light and dark mixing, co-existing, making a cage, a tether. Symbols of earth, air, fire, water, life, and death linked together. "*You must protect the key. You shall be the lock. Stand here—"* A slap across the face brought her back to reality.

This reality.

Her reality.

Paige sat sideways in the passenger seat of Chief White's unmarked car. The door was open, and he knelt beside her in the dirt, a hand on her arm, supporting her. He stared up at her with concern.

Bile rose in her mouth. She shoved him out of the way, collapsing on her hands and knees, retching. She heaved until nothing was left. Smoke rose from the spilled contents of her stomach and the stagnant smell of sulfur penetrated her nostrils.

She wiped her mouth with a shaking hand. What the fuck had just happened?

CHAPTER 2

Chapter

2

Paige pulled herself back into the passenger seat of the car, fighting to wrap her head around what she'd just experienced.

Sulfur.

Sulfur? From what she remembered, sulfur was a telltale sign of demons, but here? It had to be demons. Right? Real demons? What did she need to protect against that?

Shit. She didn't know. Understanding symbols was one thing, but the Whiskeys didn't deal with demons. Spells, sure. Ghosts, sure. Herbs. Yeah, absolutely.

Real demons? This had to be a joke.

But was real. That—what she'd just lived through had been real. Right? The vision? Throwing up sulfur?

All she had to do was follow the clues. They were right there.

Her notes said the clues had been there in the Pilmner case, too. Had she followed them, tracked down a real demon, and then lost her memories because of it? Was this a dangerous path she was walking?

She could call Leslie. Maybe her sister would know something. She'd been practicing magick a lot longer than Paige had.

Has she?

That wasn't the demon's voice.

That had come from somewhere deep inside her. The question didn't even make sense. She was just thrown off center because of the demon. Great. She couldn't even trust her own mind.

Besides, Leslie was about to have a baby any day now. She was not the right person to call. So, who else could Paige call?

Dexx Colt. He was a demon hunter. He'd been by a few times in the last five years, working on cases in the Denver area. They'd become fairly decent friends, but he never got close.

Still. Maybe she should call him.

She got to her feet and stumbled.

"What happened?" Chief White stood away from the smoking vomit, his face pinched in concern.

"I don't know." It was the best answer she had. Magickal crap happened to the others in her family. Not to her. This was totally new territory.

Was it though? that voice asked again.

Of course it was. She'd know if she had magick.

But what about those missing years?

"I'm taking you to the clinic," Chief White said, gripping her elbow. "I'll call Dr. McCormick. Let him know to stay there a little longer."

She shook her head. The world spun, making her stomach lurch. "Isn't he the coroner?"

"Reading up on us?"

"The reports." He'd been the one to sign off on the autopsies.

"Yeah, well," Chief White said, tipping his head to the side with a smile that said she was doing okay. "He's also the doc. Small town."

She stopped their progress toward his car. "I'm fine." She really wasn't. "I just need sleep." There was something about seeing a vision and then going to a doctor afterward that made it that much more real, and she didn't want that. She didn't want him running tests and seeing what they came back with. Probably nothing. But could she be sure of that?

What if sulfur showed up in the bloodwork? It had been in her

stomach. How would she explain that away? She couldn't.

"This is my jurisdiction. I'm having the doctor check you out."

"No," she said forcefully. She took in a deep, steadying breath and gave him her full attention. "Look, Chief, the truth is, I had a long night before I got on the plane. The flight wasn't that comfortable. Had a chatty guy sitting next to me the whole way and a bratty kid in front of me. The drive was long, and I think the heat is getting to me. I just need sleep."

His flattened lips and set jaw said he wasn't buying it.

She wasn't either, but she couldn't afford to go to the clinic and have her blood drawn. She didn't know how to alter tests or how to get them thrown out or messed up. She didn't have those kinds of contacts. She had never needed them before.

Are you sure?

No. But why would *this* be her first reaction? This was almost a muscle memory reaction. Hide the evidence. That was her first instinct. Why would that be if this was her first time? It didn't make sense.

Because it doesn't, her inside voice whispered again. *What about your missing years?*

Paige blinked. She looked over her shoulder to the slave shack. How certain was she that this was just some guy trying to get attention?

White narrowed his eyes.

What was going on?

Why was she the only Whiskey without a gift? Why did Leslie act so weird around her? Why would certain conversations stop when she entered a room when she traveled home?

Chief White took a step closer. "What's going on?" he asked quietly.

There was nothing to say.

"Look," he said, leaning forward and glancing around to make sure no one else could hear them. "I read up on your family's history. And my

momma had a touch of the gift herself." He licked his bottom lip, ducking his head. "She'd get that same look on her face sometimes, too. You saw something."

Paige couldn't admit to it. She'd lose all credibility. This wasn't the same world where spells were baked into cookies. This was the world where all that was child's play bordering on make-believe.

She listened to the insects working and playing in the tall, bowing trees. Moss dangled from the branches and swayed on the breeze that made the heavy, hot air bearable. Her button-up shirt clung to her shoulders, clinging with each breath in and refusing to release as she breathed out. The plantation house stood to the side, large and impressive like a lord surveying the lands.

And the small shack watched, as if waiting for her next move.

He glanced over her head. "You did see something. What was it?"

She shook her head. She barely knew him.

His brown eyes met hers and held them with a steely gaze. "Tell me what you saw, and I'll take you to your room."

Bad idea. Really bad idea, but she couldn't go to the clinic. "Something from the past. I think." She clamped her jaw shut. What was she thinking?

He could be an ally.

Why did it suddenly feel as if she had two personalities battling inside her?

Maybe you do. And this one has been buried for five…long years.

Jesus fucking shit.

Chief White nodded, his expression earnest. "Okay. What else? What happened?"

Tell him.

No!

She felt herself open her mouth to answer. "I was a demon sent to

Earth to protect mankind."

He nodded as if this made sense, his shoulders relaxing slightly. "Okay. From what?"

"Themselves? There was a witch and an angel." She shook her head, recalling the vision, terrified it might overtake her again. "I didn't see them, though."

"Interesting."

"And a…special key. There was a key I had to protect."

"What was this key to?"

She didn't remember if the demon had said in the vision or not, but she knew. She just knew. "The Gate to Hell."

Chief White closed his eyes for a moment and then reopened them. "The key to the Gates to Hell is here? In my parish?"

"Gate. As in singular."

"And that's in St. Francisville, too?" he asked incredulously.

"I—" She shrugged. "That I don't know."

"Was there anything else? How are these murders tied to that?"

She pressed shaking fingers to her lips. "The demon that got me. He's trapped. In that shack."

Chief White's face paled. He straightened and turned to stare at the building, his eyes wide.

"This is where all the bodies were found, right?"

He nodded, then turned back to her. "Should I be worried? About my men?"

She knew next to nothing about demons.

You don't? Her own voice asked snide and superior.

No. "I don't know. But my first thought is that's what the killer is trying to raise."

"You believe our killer is trying to summon a trapped demon to get possession of a key that will open the Gate to Hell that's located in my

parish."

"The demon is, for sure." That was not a sure thing.

Follow your instinct, her inside voice said, sounding frustrated.

"The key, though? I don't know. I got the impression"—From a vision. She still couldn't get over the fact that she was having a conversation about a vision as a clue in a real murder investigation—"that the demon had failed to protect the key when he'd been captured and trapped."

"That, unfortunately, makes sense. Okay." White flagged down one of the officers stationed outside the door. "Extend the perimeter. I don't want anyone inside that shack unless it's absolutely necessary. When Dr. McCormick gets here, help get the body moved as quickly as possible and then shut down the area."

The officer nodded.

The other one stepped through the door.

"Duke, please take Detective Whiskey's car back to the Rose Inn. We'll follow."

"Yes, Chief." Duke turned, a tight smile on his face as he held out his large hand for the keys.

She fished them out of her pocket and handed them over.

"Let's get you to the inn." Chief White walked briskly around the front of the car.

Paige sat down in the passenger seat of his sedan and shut the door, feeling like she was inside an oven. Chief White was handling the idea of her having visions *really well*. A little too well? Was there such a thing? What would he get out of playing along? No. He'd been spooked before. When his mother had visions, she'd obviously shared some, so he'd been brought up with the idea.

He could make a good ally.

Finally.

That voice. Her voice. Paige didn't understand what was going on, or

why it had started now.

Chief White started the car and the air conditioner shot out cooked air. He glanced at her with concern. “You’re sure you don’t want to go to the clinic?”

“I’m sure.”

“And you’re going to be okay if we just go back to the inn?”

She wasn’t sure, but she didn’t know what else to do. She closed her eyes.

The car stopped. The engine was cut off.

Paige opened her eyes, blinking in surprise at a large white house. A sign in the front read Rose Inn. This was a much nicer plantation. Her car waited in another parking space.

“We’re here,” Chief White said.

When had she fallen asleep? She nodded dully and fumbled for the door handle.

“You don’t look good.”

Bile rose in her mouth. A wave of dizziness assaulted her. She just needed to get to her bed. Wherever that was. She got out of the car, doubling over, her hands on her knees.

The driver’s side door slammed shut. Gravel crunched. She pulled herself upright using the open car door.

Sound traveled to her like she was in a tunnel. She opened her eyes but didn’t see…anything. No plantation. No sunshine. No trees, for that matter. Just…darkness.

“Whiskey, are you okay?”

“Chief White,” she said, her voice miles away. “Maybe I should—”

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t kn—”

“Paige,” a familiar male voice called.

“Dexx? What are you doing—” She stopped, unable to continue. She

held out her hand, grabbing only air as she fell.

Fell.

Fell.

"*What are you doing here*?" the deep, British-sounding voice asked.

Paige recoiled, or would have, but she couldn't move more than flopping her arms around. The voice wasn't hers, wasn't Bal—

The name slipped into the fog of her brain.

"Dexx." Paige's head wobbled on her neck. She hadn't fallen to the ground like she thought she had. She remained partially upright, but how? Hands held her up, pressed against her ribs, and dug into her arm. "Something's—"

A vessel? the male British-sounding voice said.

"No." Her voice shook.

A force pushed against her mind, searching for a chink in her soul, for a way in.

"Shit." Dexx's rough hands gripped her tighter, almost painfully, but a cleaner pain than the one in her head. "Help me get her inside."

"I need to take her to the—"

Paige's head fell back. A guttural roar sliced its way from her throat. Holy shit.

That couldn't have been her voice. Couldn't…have…

"Now," Dexx demanded. His expression softened as she looked into his eyes. "Damn it, Paige. What the fuck did you let in?"

The answer, of course, was nothing. She couldn't. She didn't have anything for a demon to want.

The runes. The runes had to have been a trap. She tried to picture them in her head, but they slipped away from her.

What had they meant? Her mind slogged to a halt. Nothing made sense. The tall man in the suit. The office with expensive furniture. The… the… her mind went blank, then the nothing swallowed her.

* * *

“Who are you?” the cop asked.

From the look of things, Leslie had been right to ask Dexx to look in on Paige’s case. He’d obviously arrived in the nick of time. He ignored the cop for a moment. The fun name game stuff could be handled later. “Fanny!”

“Yes?” she shouted back as she opened the door.

While he’d waited for Paige to show up, he’d flirted with the owner. Great gal. Quite the gab and without a doubt, she was the local gossip. “Be a dear and grab my bag out of the dining room?”

Alarm slashed across Fanny’s round face. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Just grab the bag and put it in my room.” He was going to kill Leslie and Alma.

The cop stopped him on the second-floor landing with an iron grip.

Dexx stared at the cop. Hard. They didn’t have time for this shit.

Forceful concern filled the Black man’s face. “You will answer the question. Who are you?”

So, the cop needed this to happen right now. Okay. Yeah. This was time well vested. “Dexx. Colt. Demon hunter.”

The cop didn’t even flinch.

Huh. “This needs to be handled. Right now. She doesn’t have a lot of time left.”

As if on cue, Paige’s eyes shot open. The rich, nut brown had been replaced by pure black. A grimace twitched across her face. “This vessel belongs to me.”

The words might have come from Paige’s mouth, but the voice had too many layers to be human. And it had an accent that Paige didn’t have.

The cop’s eyes widened. However, to the man’s credit, that was his only reaction.

“Her room is upstairs. Help me.”

“She just drove in from the airport.”

“And *you* made the reservation.” Dexx took her shoulders. “I just took the liberty of checking in for her. Would you bring her bags?”

“Fanny wouldn’t let just anyone check in for her.”

“I know, right? She’s a good girl.” Would he just fucking hurry up?

The cop raised his eyebrows and grabbed Paige’s bags.

Finally. Dexx hoisted her up and carried her like a child. “I’m her fiancé. Came to surprise her.” Wasn’t a complete lie. He *had* come to surprise her because Leslie had called. Thank goodness he had, too. The demon didn’t have full possession of Paige’s body. Odd. She was fighting it. Maybe it couldn’t get a full toehold. Maybe they had some time and half a chance.

Fanny led the way down the corridor to the right and opened the third door on the left. She stepped back, Dexx’s duffel still clutched in her arms.

“Thanks, Fanny,” Dexx grunted.

“Chief White,” she said, her voice hitched. “What in the name of the Lord is goin’ on?”

Chief of Police, huh? Dexx dumped Paige on a chair. “Nothin’s goin’ on, Fanny,” Dexx said, adopting a slight twang to soften his words. He needed Fanny to relax, and for everyone to calm down.

Her hand left the bag to cross herself.

He took his duffle from her arms.

“Look, Fanny,” Chief White said, taking her arm and leading her out of the room. “We just came from a crime scene. She encountered something down there.”

“Shouldn’t she be at the clinic, then?”

“With Dr. McCormick dealing with the body?”

Her eyes widened. “So, it is true.”

Chief White nodded, his eyes closed for a moment. “Now, be a blessing and don’t tell anyone about it.”

She wasn’t dismissed so easily. “It was Eddie, wasn’t it?”

The chief gripped the door with one hand and sighed. “It was.”

“It was them witches, Chief. You know that same as I do.” She crossed herself again, his time with a heavy nod to accent her conviction.

“We don’t.”

“His store was goin’ belly up, and with his wife pregnant, don’t take a scholar to suss out what happened.”

Whoa. Now that was a connection worth noting. Dexx interjected himself into the conversation. “You think he could have sold his soul?”

“To the devil?” Fanny’s grey eyes lit. “Yes. Yes, I do. That man was crazed tryin’ to find a way to unload that store. He went to see them witches several times.”

Chief White glanced at Dexx and shook his head, his lips tight as if to say, “Don’t rile her.”

Yeah. Okay. Whatever. This was the best lead they had, though, witches. The Whiskeys, he knew. They were good people. Well, most of them, anyway. But others?

Some others weren’t as nice. At least, not the two he’d met.

“What about her?” Fanny asked, glancing at Paige.

“She’ll be fine. Bring some lemonade?” Chief White closed the door firmly in the woman’s face.

“Thanks for that.” Usually, when the police got involved, the situation turned into nine hells of gagglefuck.

“Don’t thank me yet. She’s just getting started.” The police chief stared at Paige, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “What’s the plan?”

That guy had a seriously level head. Dexx didn’t know whether to be concerned or grateful. He dumped the contents of his bag on the bed. Holy water. Demon knife. Salt rounds—those weren’t going to help.

Chalk. An old journal.

He didn't have what he needed for a devil's trap. Crap.

Well, he could at least protect the door. He grabbed a Sharpie and drew a few symbols along the doorframe.

"Fanny is going to kill you."

"I'll paint over it."

Paige's head jerked to the side, her brown eyes wide. "Dexx," she whispered. "Oh, shit."

Dexx took two steps and knelt beside her. "Is he gone?"

Paige shook her head. "Still here."

"How did he get in?"

"What is he?" Paige was pale, her skin clammy.

Dexx pursed his lips in surprise. "You don't have your gift back?"

"Don't." She ground her teeth. "Have one. Wha—"

Fury leapt in his chest. "I'm going to strangle that woma—"

"She is my vessel," the demon said in a thick British accent.

Dexx scrambled away, his hand over his mouth.

Alma, Paige's grandmother, had bound Paige's demon summoning gift and had made her forget. They'd all agreed her ability to raise demons at will was too dangerous, especially after the Pilmner case. But that wasn't the real reason her gift had been bound.

No. In a fit of wild rage, she'd traveled all the way from Texas to New York to kill her mother, using a demon to assist her. Dexx'd been there for that and had seen it happen. He was the only reason Rachel was still alive.

There were a few things he could do, but most of them were dangerous. Not all humans survived demon possession, and with her gift? Who knew how it even worked? Could the demon get a hold of it while possessing her? Was that the reason for using her? Without containment. If the demon discovered who she was—What demon didn't

know who she was? She was the talk of Hell. How many other demon summoners were there? There were none.

Shit. Shit. Shit. “Did she summon it?”

The police officer pulled his attention away from Paige, startled. “What?”

“The demon. Did she summon the demon?”

The cop shook his head. “She thinks maybe the killer is trying to.”

Just like the Pilmner case. Dexx didn’t like this. “Did someone touch her? Someone who might have already been possessed?”

“She touched something at the scene.”

“Could you be more specific?”

The other man shook his head and shrugged. “There are a lot of symbols there. She touched one of them. I don’t know.”

Well, things were about to get serious. “Okay, Chief. You don’t want to be here.”

“Maybe I do.” He stood and squared up to Dexx, his bulk blotting the doorway.

“You really don’t.” Dexx opened the door and pushed the police chief into the hallway. “If you think of anything else, call. I can handle this, but me. Alone.”

A guttural roar filled the room as Dexx slammed the door.

With the door closed, he crept toward Paige.

Her lips curled. “You do not want to get in my way, little man.”

“Maybe I do, and you don’t want to get in mine.” Dexx slammed his fist into her jaw.

Chapter 3

Dexx had knocked out his fair share of people. In his line of work, being polite could get him killed. Or worse. So, he knew what he was doing. Paige was out cold. He maneuvered her onto the bed, then sat beside her, grabbed his flask of holy water from his bag, and poured some into her palm.

Nothing happened.

It proved a theory. Or did it? Demons were naturally drawn to her. It didn't matter if her gift was working or not.

Recapping the flask, he grabbed a ballpoint pen.

So, maybe, when the demon had attempted to possess her, she'd been able to fight back somehow.

Or maybe the son of a bitch was just hiding.

What demon had he heard of that could hide inside a host from holy water?

He dug out his phone, thumbed through his recent calls, and hit Leslie's name.

"Hey, Dexx," Leslie Whiskey said in her soft Texan drawl, her voice full of laughter. "No, Mandy. Please, I'm on the phone."

Dexx heard the girl in the background but couldn't make out what she said.

"Later. Okay." Leslie's Texan drawl softened. "Sorry about that, Dexx. What's up?"

"It's a demon." He started a protection sigil on Paige's wrist.

"What happened?" Leslie asked, all distractions erased from her tone as panic rode in. "Is she okay?"

"For now." He studied the blooming bruise on Paige's jaw. "But I

don't know for how much longer."

"Where is she? What happened? Did she summon?" With each question, her voice rose another octave.

Which question was he supposed to answer first? The last one? "No."

"Then what happened?"

He filled in the outlines of the mark. "Les, who else knows about her gift?"

"No one outside the family."

Not entirely true. "*I* know."

"You're family. Dexx, what's—"

"There was a trap spell." He couldn't be sure. He wasn't a witch and didn't know much about spells. "At least, I think. That's the only thing that fits here."

Silence on the other end of the phone call. "It could have been for anyone."

Seriously? She was going to play dumb. "Why weren't there any trap spells before this? Our guy murdered two others prior to Paige being brought here."

"It could be that this guy just didn't know what he was doing and set something up on accident."

"How many times does accidental magick happen? On this scale?"

"Accidents happen all the time."

"Demons, Les. This is *Paige*. We're not after some kid searching for magick spells on YouTube." Dexx gripped the pen too tight in his frustration, digging deep into Paige's skin. "This is not an accident, Les. Someone knows. The first two murders were to get her down here. This one was for her."

Leslie was quiet on the other end of the line.

He needed to lighten up. Leslie was his best bet right now. He just needed her to quit refusing to see what was right in front of her face.

They were out of time. Paige, for whatever reason, had always been a player in the magickal realm. Demons. Angels. Those fucking assholes wanted to take over the damned world.

"I've seen would-be practitioners," Dexx said, forcing his voice to level out, "do some pretty dumb things, but this? People who kill people are serious about something."

"Gah dang it!" Something clunked on the other side of the call.

"Such language." Dexx grinned. He knew from experience that the woman could make sailors blush.

"Don't make fun. How're the shields on her gift holding?"

"Damn it, Les." Dexx pressed his lips together as he fought to refrain from saying what was really on his mind. "Why haven't you taken the memory blockers down? Don't you realize how open to attack she is now?"

"Do *not* blame this on me. I released them before she left, but…" He heard her take in a deep breath. "It was worse than last time. If you want to place blame, start with Grandma and Balnore."

On one hand, Dexx was glad Paige couldn't summon. She'd tried to kill her own mother with her gift, so, yeah. But on the other hand, it might have been best to keep her on the board, but on their side. She was powerful. Helping her, supporting her? Wouldn't it be cool to have a demon summoner on a short leash? "It's the gift she was born with. There has to be a reason it was given to her." His hand jerked the pen in anger along Paige's wrist, creating a line that didn't belong on the sigil.

"She's dangerous and you know it. She summoned demons to kill, Dexx."

"Just *one* demon and just *one* person." He brushed the pen across the sigil to repair the damage, not quite believing he was making this argument because he'd been the one to save Rachel in the first place.

"My mother."

“You have met the woman, right?” She wasn’t the nicest person on the planet, and after the day Paige had driven all the way up from Texas to kill her, something had shifted for him. Before that day, Rachel had been the woman who’d helped him. Granted, his mom was still alive and wasn’t a bad person, but Rachel had saved him. She’d given him the attention he’d needed after his brother had committed suicide after his demon possession. She’d been the one to keep him on the straight and narrow. She’d pointed him toward demon hunting.

But something about that day just didn’t fit right. Paige had gotten out of that car with hope on her face. She was happy.

The anger hadn’t shown up until the police did.

Dexx’d started really started watching Rachel after that. She manipulated Nick and Dexx like they were stringed instruments and controlled every single waking moment of Leah’s life. Had she really saved Leah from Paige when she’d taken custody and moved the girl from Texas to New York?

Getting to know Paige in Denver had only made this fight worse. Paige wasn’t a bad person. Dumb sometimes, but not a bad person. The more he got to know her, the more he realized he might be on the wrong side of this custody case.

After getting to know Paige and Rachel, it wouldn’t surprise him to know that Rachel had set up the entire situation, wanting to drive Paige to raise a demon *to* kill her, to prove that she was right. It was a card Rachel had played a few times, but when she did it to help him, it made sense. This might be what it looked like to be on the other end, though.

Leslie sighed heavily in his ear. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“How’d you manage to wipe Leah from her memories, anyway? And get her to forget all about her abilities? She can’t even summon fire.”

Leslie was quiet for a moment. “It isn’t easy. She keeps breaking through.”

“Yeah, well, maybe now’s the time to stop. What if the next time the damned thing gets in and strips away all your protections? What if it gets a hold of her gift?”

“Which demon is it?”

He ran a hand over his head. “No clue. Not yet. He talks like a Brit.”

“Lots of demons do, Dexx.”

“I know, Leslie.”

She sighed, not adding anything for a long moment. “If only she had stayed. I could have helped her.”

“Except that you let her get shipped off to Denver.”

“When she visited, the house woke her up.”

“Because it’s a witch house?”

“Because all of her memories of Leah are here,” Leslie said, as if talking to a child.

“Yeah.” Not that he knew much about that. His mother had been good at supporting him and his brother, but he hadn’t paid much attention. His father left and never came back, and he’d taken it out on her. It hadn’t left them with much of a relationship, though she had tried.

Dexx let the silence linger until he finished the sigil on Paige’s wrist. “Any more thoughts? Like, uh, I don’t know. How I’m supposed to keep your protections in place?”

“I don’t know. Just—hold on a sec.”

Dexx knew what was coming, but his hands were busy so he couldn’t pull the phone away from his ear.

“Grandma!” Leslie’s voice shrilled in his ear.

“You could have moved the phone away from your mouth.” He bit his lip, surveying the temporary tattoo. Not a real tattoo, just an ink drawing. If this worked, he’d talk Paige into making it permanent.

“I did, you dolt.”

“Again, with the language.”

“Shh. Grandma, I’ve got Dexx.”

He heard Alma in the background. Things clanked and clamored. She was either in the kitchen or in her workroom.

“Dexx?” her voice crackled over the speaker. “What happened?”

“I already told Leslie. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“You’re a pain in my ass, boy.”

“I do what I can, ma’am.”

“Do you need me there?”

If this was just a demon, he could handle himself. He was a tried-and-true demon hunter. Well-practiced, even. But with her? She was a demon summoner who would be really, really pissed if the thing woke her memories.

“I hear your silence.”

“Alma, I could reall—”

“Don’t go anywhere,” Leslie interrupted. “Whatever you do, don’t let her go back to any crime scenes. We’re on our way.”

“But the kids—”

“What do you think their dad is for? You have protections up?”

“How stupid do you think I am?” he asked. “But how good are they going to be if it’s using the back door to get in?”

“You tested her, right? You said she wasn’t possessed.”

“Yes, I tested her and, no, she’s not possessed,” he said tightly. “But how do I test for a bond? Will it show up with holy water?”

“I’ll ask Grandma. Maybe she can come up with something.”

“We can hope so.” He hung up the phone and looked at the sleeping woman. “I told you I’d kill you if you lost control of your gift.” He blinked and rose from the bed. “I just don’t know if I can.”

Her bags lay in the corner, moved from where the cop had put them neatly on the bed. He checked her computer bag to see if she had any files. It was heavy enough to have a massive laptop, but what he found

instead was a tablet and three inches of paperwork.

The papers had nothing to do with this case. To be honest, he didn't know why she had them, though he didn't invest much time in deciphering them.

The tablet was password protected. After three failed guesses, the screen locked up for thirty seconds. He sighed, racking his brain for something. This was Paige. She wouldn't choose her family's names, or birthdates, or even random numbers attached to names. Her pet wasn't an option because she wasn't an animal person.

She was, however, a huge fan of Queen, and her favorite song was "Bicycle Race." He replaced a couple of letters with the numbers he knew her logical mind was likely to use. Still blocked.

Holding his breath, he did it again but added Leah's age.

He was in.

He closed his eyes, expelling a heavy breath. Even with her memories wiped, she still remembered.

Paige startled violently enough to shake the bed and emitted a gut-wrenching cry. He looked over at her, trying to pry his heart from his throat.

Her eyes were open, her white-knuckled hands gripping the comforter beneath her.

Dexx scrambled to the bed, grabbing his flask of holy water on the way. "Pea?"

"He's here," she whispered. She closed her eyes, her whole body relaxing as if she had suddenly fallen asleep.

He unscrewed the cap and sprinkled a bit of water over her. It lay against her cheek, on her bared arms, on her exposed belly. Nothing. Hollywood made it look so easy. Throw some holy water, spout some words in Latin, and presto, instant dead demon. If only.

"Pea, you're dreaming." He set the water on the table next to the bed.

He grabbed her shoulders and shook lightly. “Come on. Wake up.”

“Leah,” she sobbed. Her clawed hand raked at her heart, tugging the V-neck of her tank down. Blood welled in the trails her nails left.

“Oh, shit.” If the memory blockers were coming down and Leslie had already attempted to give her memories back but had bound them again, it meant things could get rather… bad. Dexx pinned her wrist to her side and slapped her face. Nothing.

She convulsed, her body twisting in pain as grief ravaged her face.

“Not good. Not good. Very pissed off woman with the ability to call demons. Not freakin’ good.” He reached up to slap her a bit harder, but stopped at the sight of the sigil on her wrist glowing a fiery red.

“Oh, God.” He grabbed the holy water off the table and glared into the flask. “Richard, if you shyster'd me, I am so gonna kick your ass.” He poured the rest of the flask on her arm where the rune burned. It sizzled and evaporated instantly. “Oh…shit.”

His mind scrambled, coming up blank. Trained demon hunter. Honed instincts.

Scared shitless.

Her eyes shot open. The chocolate brown was gone. Black filled her eyes.

“Paige!” He jumped on the bed and straddled her, pressing her shoulders in his hands.

Her lips twisted as she grabbed hold of his wrists. “Hunter.” The voice that came out of her resonated with a thousand different tones.

Demon. Not Paige.

“Let her go,” Dexx growled.

The thing just smiled with her lips. “I will protect the key at all costs.”

Chapter 4

"Paige?" Dexx had to get through to her. "Wake up!"

The demon raised itself onto an elbow. "Look what you did. See how you helped." It pressed the burning rune to Dexx's arm.

Power from the temporary tattoo surged up Dexx's arm, up his neck, into his head. Was his flesh burning? Nine hells, it *had* to be.

"Paige," Dexx roared, trying to make it stop.

The fire in his arm stopped. Or maybe he disconnected from his body. Visions passed through him, along with emotions that didn't belong to him. He stared at a familiar kitchen table. That was Alma's. But he stared at Paige's hands.

He felt numb. It was like an empty well inside him. No love. No hurt. No anger. Just numb.

Concern shone in Leslie's brown eyes. Why would Leslie ever look at him like that? "How about you call Leah early today?"

Leah? Wait. Was he reliving Paige's *memories*?

Oh no, he was. What was going on? "Paige." Dexx fought to get his real hand to push against her, to break away from the rune. That had to be where the bond was, why he was seeing her memories, though how he didn't know. "Paige. You've gotta wake up. Fight this."

She seemed to ignore him. Maybe she couldn't hear him. Maybe the banished memories were too loud to stay buried.

She walked to the phone with doom blooming in her heart and as she did, Dexx slipped deeper into her existence, becoming her, feeling what she felt, seeing what she saw, thinking what she thought.

It was the same every time. She knew what to expect. She knew what she would hear, what would happen. She knew the pain she would go to bed

with. She bit her lip as she dialed her mother's number and choked down the rising tears of desperate frustration. She wouldn't stop. She would let Leah know she loved her now and forever.

"Hello?" Rachel's cheerful voice said as she answered the phone.

"Rachel," Paige said, her tone devoid of emotion.

"Paige?" Rachel asked in surprise. "You're calling early. Do you have a date?"

Guilt flared in Paige's chest. Was she being selfish for calling early? She just wanted to take a bath, let some of the pain ebb before she went to bed, maybe push the nightmares aside for a night. "No. Just calling early. That's all."

"Well, Leah's in the middle of something right now. I could interrupt her if that would make you happy."

Paige ground her jaw. What could she do? Argue with the woman? What good would that do? Every time she stood up to her, Rachel used Leah as a hostage, buying Paige's submission. "Fine. I'll call back later."

"Wait," Rachel said quickly, before Paige could hang up. "I actually wanted to talk to you about something without Leah here."

Paige raised an angry eyebrow. "What? Need more money?"

"What did I ever do to you?" Rachel admonished. "All I ever did was love you."

That woman had never done anything for Paige. She kept herself silent for fear of losing her chance to talk to Leah later that evening.

"I want you to come up some weekend. Soon," Rachel said.

That threw Paige completely off guard. "What?" Hope flared painfully in her chest, poking at the numbness she so desperately needed to make it through each day.

"Leah misses you and I was just thinking that it would be really good for her." Rachel paused. "I didn't want to mention it in front of her. You know how you are. You're never on time and were never dependable."

She was as dependable as anybody. Sometimes traffic or work on a new case would interfere, but she tried to—she shook her head. Paige always tried to be dependable.

"It hurt Leah more than she let on that you didn't come home when you said you would."

"But—"

"Just because you gave birth *to this little girl doesn't make you a* mother. *There's more to being a mother than having a job."*

Guilt pounded through Paige like a gilded hammer. "I did the best I could."

Rachel's tone turned silky sweet. "I know you did, baby. I should have been there for you more when you were growing up. I should have shown you how to be a better *mother."*

Paige leaned up against the wall, crossing her arms over her chest, and said nothing.

"Okay. You don't need to say anything." Hurt laced Rachel's words. "I understand."

"What do you want me to say?" Paige asked, her voice slipping. "You abandoned us when I was a kid."

"You just had to throw that in my face, didn't you?" Rachel asked, sniffling. "Can you be up here this weekend?"

"That's tomorrow. I can't afford the plane ticket with that little advance notice. Even if I got in the car now, I doubt I'd make it in time to get up there and come back in time to get to work."

"Work. It's always work taking first priority, and not your family. This is what I'm talking about."

"Someone has to pay the bills. You don't."

The line was silent for a few seconds. "I'm trying to help you."

Why did it feel like a trap? "How about next weekend? Gives me time to talk to my boss, get an extra day off. I'll drive up there and then drive back."

Rachel clicked her tongue. "Sounds fine. You can't stay here, though. I

can't run the risk that you'll steal her in the middle of the night."

Like Rachel did? *"Of course. I expected nothing less."*

"Paige." Dexx fought to regain control of his body. Something bound his arm to hers. The rune? The demon? Why would the demon want him to see this? Dexx had to get her to wake up. Had to get her back. Just… fucking…how? "Come on! Wake up." He stroked her face gently, knowing the hurt of the memory he hadn't known existed. How did she function after something like that?

"Dexx?" Paige asked, her voice tight with tears. "What is this? What's happening?"

"I need you to wake up."

"Is this real?" she whispered.

He grimaced, refusing to lie to her. Whatever happened, she'd know the truth. "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, God." She closed her eyes.

Her vision gripped Dexx again, shoving him into her pain and giving him no choice but to relive her worst moment with her.

She had driven straight without stopping for more than gas and sleep. She called Rachel to let her know she had made it into town and to ask if it was okay to come right over. Rachel had been cheerful when she'd agreed. Too cheerful. A sinking feeling filled Paige's stomach, but she pulled up in front of her mother's house, a tall beast built onto the side of the round and rocky mountain itself.

Hope loomed heavily in her chest as she walked up the steep concrete stairs to the front door, gripping the handle of the gift bag. Would Leah be happy to see her? Would Rachel allow them to play games or sit and hold each other? Would they be allowed to talk? How tall had she grown? She was almost nine. What size pants was she wearing? Was her favorite color still pink?

She clutched Leah's early birthday gift a little tighter. She'd spent two hours trying to pick it out, not knowing when she'd be allowed to see her

daughter again. It had to be perfect, something Leah would want to keep with her, to remember her by. She took a calming breath and knocked on the door, pasting on a hopeful smile. She heard footsteps and the doorknob rattle. Nervous excitement shot through her. Did Leah still like daisies? Had she grown out of soccer? Was she into Barbie yet? Did she like Care Bears or maybe Rainbow Brite? It was trying to make a comeback.

"Ms. Paige Whiskey?" a male voice said.

Paige looked up in surprise to see a uniformed officer standing in the doorway. "Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

Paige's mouth opened and that sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach grew. "Rachel invited me up for the weekend. She said I could spend some time with my daughter." Although she knew. She knew what was going on. She saw the trap for what it was now.

"Please don't do this," she whispered, her eyes filling with hopeless and heart-broken tears. "Please."

"Ms. Whiskey," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave now."

Silent sobs racked her body as she shook her head. "No. Rachel told me to come. She said I could see my daughter. Please, don't do this."

"I have a restraining order. You were supposed to have been served yesterday."

"I was on the road yesterday. Rachel knew this. I called her when I left."

"If you don't leave now, I'm going to have to arrest you."

Paige looked up at the sky as tears fell from her eyes. "Can I—can I just see her?"

The police officer's dark eyes filled with sympathy as he shook his head. "You know the law."

She tried to still her sobs as she attempted to look behind him. "I've been driving for almost two days." She looked him in the eye. "Please. Please."

“I’m sorry, Ms. Whiskey,” he said, opening the screen door and taking her arm. “Really, I am.”

As soon as he stepped through the door, Paige was able to see her.

Leah’d grown. The top of her blond head was even with Rachel’s chest. Her hair cascaded over her shoulders in a blond waterfall.

Her baby.

Rachel wrapped her arm around Leah’s shoulders. The woman’s expression was smug.

Leah’s expression was…crushed.

Paige broke. She reached for the door even as the officer pulled her away. “Leah.”

“Momma!” Leah screamed with all the sorrow and heartache one little girl could muster.

“Leah!” Paige cried, trying to fight the officer, trying to get one last glimpse of her girl. “I just want to hug her. Please, just let me hold her.”

“I’m sorry,” the officer said, taking his arm around her middle and practically carrying her down the steps.

“Momma!” Leah screamed again.

“Leah,” Paige cried. “I love you.” She twisted in the officer’s arm. “I got you a present.”

“Stop. Paige.” Dexx ran up to the officer holding her, though he was watching himself through Paige’s eyes and not his own. He looked so angry and so self-assured. “I’ve got her. I’ll take over from here.”

“Just keep her away from the house,” the officer said. “Or I will have to arrest her.”

“Yeah,” Dexx said, fighting her resisting, sobbing body. “I’ve got her.”

She knew what she had to do.

The vision stopped.

The link between their arms broke with a sudden repulsive pressure and Dexx pulled himself back into his own mind, grateful that the

experience was over.

Dexx rolled off the bed and stood, crouched, in the middle of the room, breathing as hard as if he'd gone rounds with the demon.

Instead, he'd lived with Paige through one of the worst moments of her life.

A sick pit widened in Dexx's stomach.

The demon was using those memories as his door, the chink in Paige's armor.

The demon was going to strip her of the wards and memory blockers. It was going to use her rage as his way in.

And then he'd have control of a woman capable of summoning any demon she wanted.

They were so screwed.

Chapter 5

Chapter

5

Dexx had a decision to make. Leave her alone and hope she managed to fight the demon off or give her a little external help.

After a brief but furious internal debate, he decided to tranquilize her. He didn't know what she would do, how she would react, but the demon had gotten too close.

He grabbed his duffel and rummaged through to the bottom. The lonely plastic bottle he pulled out rattled with two pills. It would have to do. He stuffed them in Paige's mouth and chased them with water. She managed to swallow without drowning and settled again.

Leslie, and hopefully Alma, were on their way. He just had to buy time until then.

For him to help, he needed a few things in town. First stop, the vet's office.

Locking the door behind him, he moved quickly to his car. "Come on Jackie, we got some people to schmooze." He pulled open the door of his '70 Challenger. Rachel had found the listing, and had even helped him buy the car, financing most of his hunting demons trips. She cut him off when he'd started hanging out with Paige in Denver. It'd started out as him checking in on her, making sure the protections were still in place. Eventually, though, it had shifted to more of a distant friendship. He'd always known Rachel was manipulative, but now that he had Paige's version of the moment she used to keep him in check, he realized why she'd cut him off. She knew he was starting to like Paige

over her.

Truth be told, it wasn't hard.

He pulled the Challenger up to the vet's office and shut off the rumbling engine. Taking a moment, he pinched the bridge of his nose before sliding his fingers along the bottom rim of his eye sockets.

How could he call himself a friend if he'd never understood how she felt? He hadn't even cared about her side of the custody battle. For years. He'd sided with Rachel—who'd practically raised him—thinking Paige was a danger to her child.

Until Denver.

After Alma had stripped away Paige's memories of Leah, she'd moved to Denver. Her old boss found her a job, and she just moved.

Demon cases followed her.

He'd gone out there. Hunted the demons down. Did her job for her.

One day, he'd decided to drop in, to see how she was doing.

He discovered she was a pretty cool chick and a rather empowering woman. They'd become friends of a sort.

Up until that point, he'd assumed she was cool because she wasn't the demon summoner anymore. The "evil" had been banished. As long as her gift remained buried, she'd be fine.

But over the past couple of years, he'd begun to wonder. Would she be any different with her gift? Would her abilities really change who she was?

And, then, he'd started questioning Rachel. Had she been right about taking Leah?

Oh, boy. She hadn't appreciated that. She'd kicked him out of her house. She'd told Nick—his best friend and her son—to stop talking to him.

And Nick had.

That gave Dexx a little more insight into the woman. Maybe the angel

whisperer wasn't so pure…

What he'd experienced with Paige was enlightening.

Swallowing, he got out of the car. The hot, muggy air greeted him gently, beckoning to him with the promise of shade from the nearby tree. He walked through the door. The dinging of the bell heralded his arrival, and he waited at the counter.

A teenage girl in a black T-shirt and jeans entered from a door in the back. "Can I help you?"

Dexx plastered on his charm. He had a face that could get him anything, and he used it. It was his weapon of choice when dealing with the mundanes. Wait. *Muggles.* That was what the Harry Potter crowd called them. The smile it put on his face brought a similar one to the girl. "I'm getting ready to go on a long trip, but my dog doesn't handle car rides well. I'm out of diazepam, which is what I normally give her. I was wondering if I could get some?"

"That shouldn't be a problem," the girl said with a smile. "What's her name?"

His eye twitched. "Doxxie."

"And what breed is she?"

"She's a Saint Great Dane." Mix a couple big breeds, and voilà, about the weight of one possessed Paige.

"Oh, she's a big dog."

He nodded, keeping his expression relaxed and genuine. "We're actually getting ready to leave right now. I was about to give her the dose so we could go when I discovered I was out. I just forgot to reorder. It's so silly of me."

"Have we seen her before?"

"No. I'm traveling through."

She winced. "You have to have a scrip."

"You're absolutely correct. Can you call the boss and let me talk to

him? See, she gets really anxious and tears up the back seat of my car." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. He'd parked Jackie right in front of the doors.

She peered over his shoulder at the parking spaces, returned her attention to him, then did a double take. "Is that your car?"

Pride surged through him. The older car had been a good idea when he rebelled against his mother, and Rachel had a ready checkbook. His hands had needed something to do and rebuilding the old junker had been ideal. Now, with all the time he spent on the road, a car with better gas mileage would be more cost effective, but then he'd have a harder time fixing it himself. Also, there were the reactions. He'd never get over that.

"Well, um, I'm sure Doctor Tom will understand." She blinked, probably not even realizing she was flirting, and went to the rear door. "I'll just be right…back."

Dexx thumped the counter with his thumb. "I'll be right here."

Paige, of course, was his Saint Great Dane, and she was the one he'd given his last dose to. She'd be out for another few hours or so. A normal person would be out the rest of the day with the dose he'd given her, but she had a demon trying to get in. The idea of what that thing could do scared the crap right out of him.

With the filled prescription in hand, he exited the office and moved on to the police station.

St. Francisville wasn't that small of a town, but it was quaint. Downtown had a real earthy feel to it and even had more than a few white picket fences. The police station wasn't much to look at. Most really weren't. Dexx walked up to the front desk.

A man in a police uniform sat behind it, reading a comic book. He put it away, offering a smile. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Chief White."

“Is he expecting you?”

“No, but he has questions for me.”

“Name?”

“Dexx Colt. I’m with Detective Whiskey.”

The police officer frowned but picked up the phone and spoke into it. After a brief moment, he nodded and gestured Dexx back.

Chief White was a big, Black guy who dwarfed the array of desks. In a straight up fist fight, Dexx wouldn’t necessarily lay money on himself. This guy looked like he had strength and know-how.

Dexx offered his hand. “Dexx Colt. I’m with Detective Whiskey. We were sort of rushed last time, and it's still kind of bad timing, but I have a few minutes.”

“Follow me. Shouldn’t take long.”

The chief’s office looked like just about every other one Dexx had ever visited. Desk. Files. A lamp. A computer. Awards and plaques on the walls.

The chief closed the door behind Dexx, making the blinds tap against the glass. “I hope you’re here to explain a few things, Mr. Colt.”

“Dexx, please, and, yes. I am. What do I call you?”

“Brian. Or Chief, or White. Whichever you prefer.”

Dexx had never understood why Paige preferred to address her colleagues by their last name. “How much of the truth do you want to hear?”

Brian gestured to a chair and sat behind his desk. “All of it. I already know some about Detective Whiskey and the Whiskey Witches. I know about her investigations, her knowledge of the arcane. I’m even aware of some of the more, shall I say, *delicate* aspects of her Dallas investigations, and some of the events that led to her to Denver. What I don’t know is what you do for them.”

“Them being the Whiskeys?”

Brian nodded.

Dexx paused. How far could he trust the Chief? He let Dexx do what he needed earlier, and with what he already knew about Paige and her cases, he decided for the full Monty. “Well, let’s start small. I’m a demon hunter.”

Nothing moved on Brian’s dark face. His eyebrows didn’t twitch. His fingers didn’t flex. He didn’t wince or flinch. After a moment, he nodded. “Who asked you to be on the case? Detective Whiskey?”

“No. Her grandmother was notified Paige was coming. We did some quick research. Paige isn’t called out of her jurisdiction for small things—if ever. When she’s requested, something unnatural is going down. We both decided Paige could use some backup.”

A slight frown furrowed Brian’s forehead. “What happened yesterday?”

“More truth?”

“I’d prefer it.”

He’d handled the hunter bit rather smoothly. Perhaps he could handle the rest. “I think she was attacked by a demon.”

Brian didn’t even flinch. “Why do you suspect that?”

However, no matter how well the other man handled things, there were aspects to a paranormal existence that just didn’t lend well to a civilian life. “There are some jars that, once opened, can’t be resealed. Are you sure you want to know?”

Brian lifted his chin, then dropped his gaze to his desk. “My mom had the sight. It wasn’t much, but she could see things sometimes, things we couldn’t explain to the rest of the world. I’m not saying I completely buy into demons and whatever else might be out there, but I do know this. I’ve got a killer in my town who’s bringing the devil with him. I don’t have the leisure to fear what doesn’t make sense.”

Dexx leaned back in his chair. “That, sir, earned you a lot of respect.”

The chief lifted one beefy shoulder, sunlight from the high window glaring brightly on his white button-up shirt.

“Okay, well, I’ll read you in.” Dexx had always wanted to say that. It sounded like he was a spy.

Brian raised an eyebrow.

Dexx grinned, then grew somber. “We have a bad situation. Paige is a demon summoner.”

“She’s a what?”

“Yeah, difficult to swallow, but true.”

Brian ran his hand along his bald head slowly.

“It gets worse. Alma—the matriarch of the Whiskey Witches, if you will—put a shield around her abilities. She had her reasons. They were valid at the time. However, having Paige here is a risk. Whatever this killer is doing allowed a demon to slip through Alma’s wards.”

“I don’t completely follow.”

Dexx placed his elbows on his knees. “Your killer might not be summoning a demon like you thought.”

“How’d you—”

“Trust me. I have my ways. Your murderer might have been luring Paige here to use her to summon for him.”

Brian sat back in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of him.

“I know you need help with your investigation, but you’ve got to send Paige away. For her safety. For yours. For your town.”

“What if it’s too late?”

“Let’s hope it’s not.”

Chapter 6

"Thanks for understanding." Dexx opened the door to Paige's room, food in a bag clenched in his teeth, his left arm full of folders.

Brian followed him into the room carrying an over-filled case box. "To be honest, the fewer people who know how many rules I'm breaking right now, the better."

"Right." Dexx dumped the folders on the small table and stashed dinner in a chair. He pulled the round table closer to the center of the room, then wiggled the crocheted doily out from under the paperwork, setting it on the bureau. He took the bottle of sedatives out of his jacket pocket before draping it over the back of a floral-canvased chair.

"How's she doing?"

Dexx sat on the edge of the bed and checked her pulse. Not that he counted her heartbeats. Half of him checked to make sure it was still beating, while the other saw to the sigil on her arm. Black ink, just the way he'd left her. Good. He popped the top off the orange drug bottle and poured two little blue diazepam pills into his palm.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Sure." Dexx shoved the two pills down her throat, feeling her tongue work as she fought to swallow and vomit at the same time. "Hand me that water bottle?"

Brian touched the bottle to Dexx's shoulder. "Tell me again why she's not at the clinic."

"You really want a demon-possessed person on a rampage in the clinic? Trust me." Dexx dribbled some of the water down her throat, watching her swallow. "Also, I'm fairly certain the good doctor would try to tell you that the dosage we're giving her would kill her."

“Will it?”

“Doubt it.”

“Doubt it?”

“Demon.”

“Right.”

Dexx stood, screwing the cap back on the water bottle. “Okay. Where do we start on the case?”

“You’re really going to send her away?” Brian’s gaze stayed on Paige’s sleeping form.

“As soon as Leslie gets here, yeah. But until and after that, you’ve got me.”

“Okay.” The chief turned to the table. “What do you need to see?”

“All of it.”

After an hour of studying the pictures, notes, and interviews, Dexx pushed away from the table with a flaming headache. He reached into his bag for his bottle of peppermint oil. He released a few drops into the palm of his hands, rubbed them around and then brought his cupped hands to his nose and mouth.

“What are you doing?” the chief asked, looking as worn out as Dexx felt.

“Dealing with a headache.”

“I have ibuprofen. The good kind, even.”

Dexx breathed deep, though the fumes stung his eyes. “Rather do this. Hate pills.”

Brian sniffed with a wry smile and tipped back in his chair, crossing his thick arms over his chest. “So, what’s the verdict? Are we in danger?”

“Yup. We all are. But the good news is I’m here and maybe Alma soon. If we can put a lid on this, we will.”

“Is she in danger?”

Dexx wished Paige wasn't. "Yes." He sighed and let his hands fall. "I don't know how they found out about her gift, but someone did. The murders, the arcane symbols? They were the bait. I've seen these symbols before, in a case in Texas. This is almost a copycat. I doubt the sacrifices did much of anything. Whoever is behind this killed those three people to lure her out. The mandala was the trap, something that was set in place with the first victim."

"She mentioned that. So, what kind of trap?"

"I don't know, but I don't like it. Leslie needs to hurry up. We need Alma."

"It's a good day's drive from Dallas."

"I know. They should be here any minute now, but with Leslie being so pregnant, they're probably stopping every ten miles so she can pee."

Brian frowned at the table, his gaze unfocused. "What's the deal with these Whiskey witches, anyway? There are entire forums dedicated to them like they're heroes or something."

Dexx fell against the back of his chair. "It's largely because they don't hide. Alma served in the military as an active, casting witch. Then, when she got out, she was very vocal about supporting the pagan community and fighting back against the paranormal."

"She sounds like a real trooper."

"She's more like a general." Dexx scraped his top lip with his teeth. "Paige and Leslie are her granddaughters. She raised them after their mother abandoned them, taking only their brother."

"Seems extreme. Why would she do that?"

"Because Paige is a demon summoner and Leslie's a medium. Rachel didn't want to deal with the dead or with demons."

Brian's eyes pinched in wonder. "So, what's she?"

"She summons angels." Dexx groaned as he recalled how he'd been accepted into her home as family, how she'd encouraged him to fight

demons. “Well, more like listens in on them. Her son—Paige’s brother—is an empath, so she deemed him safe, I guess.”

“And how are you involved?”

Dexx kind of wondered why he was going through all this, but they had time, and sharing didn’t hurt anyone. Well, unless Brian was the bad guy, but he really didn’t put off bad guy vibes. “Through Nick, her brother. Him and Rachel lived in New York, right down the street from me. He…” Dexx paused as he recalled the state Nick had found him in. He’d just lost his father, blamed his mother, and couldn’t rely on his own brother. Nick and Jackie were the only two things that had kept him together. “He just found me one day and kinda took me in.”

Brian tipped his head to the side. “How’d you become a demon hunter?”

Dexx dropped his gaze to the floor. “One possessed my brother. He went insane, got locked up and drugged. I didn’t believe him when he said he was possessed, of course. No one did, but after he killed himself, I started digging.”

“And you wound up here. Huh.”

“That would be the short to the long story.”

They sat in companionable silence for a long moment.

“What about you?” Dexx asked. “How’d you end up as a civil servant?”

Brian smiled, his eyebrows raised. “I followed my dad, my two brothers, my cousin, and my sister.”

“So there’s a whole family of you protecting the streets. Must run in the blood.”

“It does.”

Dexx ran his hands across his scalp and stood. “Well, I’m bushed and calling it a night. I didn’t have one yesterday.”

“I thought you said she was in danger, that we all were.”

“She is, and you are. However, I can’t save anyone if I’m too tired to think straight. Trust me. He’s out there somewhere, watching, waiting.”

“And what’s he going to do with her?”

Dexx turned to the bed. “Use her. But I’m hoping Leslie comes up with a plan that’ll ensure he can’t.”

“Hope?” Brian rose from his chair, grabbing his jacket off the back. “I’ll have someone guard her door.”

“And alert our position? Or that we know?”

“So you’re setting a trap and she’s the bait?”

Dexx smiled at him, a frown furrowing his brow. “You know, for a cop, I like the way you think.”

Brian shook his head and walked to the door. “I’ll stay in the next room then, keep watch while you sleep.”

Bullets against demons. Oh, what a cute mundane. “Okay. Sure. Sounds great. Wake me in four.”

Brian nodded once. He paused at the door, his eyes glued to the Sharpie sigils on the doorjamb. “Are these *really* going to help?”

“They really can’t hurt.”

Brian studied the symbols a moment longer, then opened the door and stepped through. “Right.” He closed the door behind him.

Dexx pushed the papers around on the table without really seeing them. He reviewed his sleeping options. There was the window bench, which seemed like a good idea if he was a kid, but he wasn’t, and his old bones had been broken way too many times to appreciate sleeping in that position.

There was the floor, but again, his bones. He could sleep in the chair.

Oh, no. No. His body ached from just sitting in it.

He could—the bed? Fleeting images went through his brain. No, this wasn’t the right time for that line of thinking. He scanned the other options again and decided the best option was indeed in the bed with

the half-possessed Paige. He lay down, closing his eyes to welcome the darkness.

Paige jerked upright in bed, her brown eyes open. She turned to him. “The key is calling.”

Chapter 7

Dexx flew from the bed very much alert.

First things first. Demon or Paige?

He grabbed the holy water, then looked down at the rune. Black.

It was Paige.

A different Paige. The old Paige. The one that he'd met years ago. Tough. Callused. Rough-ridden. Weathered.

She blinked and worked her shoulders. "How long have I been asleep?"

He stared at her, his eyes narrowed. "A day." He looked around at the dim room. "Maybe one and a half. How are you feeling? I gave you enough sedatives to take down an elephant."

"Good thing I'm not an elephant."

He expelled a short breath, the corner of his lips rising in a grimace. If she was joking around, that had to be good. "You said the key was calling."

"I did." Her battered gaze flitting around the room.

"Is the demon still trying to get in?"

"No." She rubbed her arms. "I stopped him."

She stopped him. Well, was that good or bad or really, really bad? He bit off that thought with a flattening of his lips. Wasn't he the one who had been hoping to see Paige the demon summoner back just a few hours ago? Admittedly, yes. This had to be good then.

She stood up and wrapped her arms around her abdomen like she was cold. "It's all true. And you were there, too. I can't tell if I want the memories or not."

What was he supposed to say to that? "Yeah. Um, I'm really sorry

about that."

"About which part? The part where I lost my daughter and am living in Hell, or the part where I actually remember it?" Paige's eyes narrowed, the danger clear on her face.

"Well, when you put it that way…" He took a deep breath to say more, but couldn't.

The room filled with silence.

What did she need? The event that had traumatized her had happened years ago, but she hadn't been given the time to heal. It had to feel like it'd just happened days ago for Paige.

"It's like I woke up, you know? From a really bad dream. One of those ones you can't wake up from, where evil things are chasing you and you can't get away no matter where you go."

"I can't—" He rubbed his ear, uncomfortable. Women didn't confide in him, generally. When he was in a room with a woman, he was either having sex or working a case, not listening while she unburdened her heart. "I don't know what to say."

"It's like I just lost her. Like it was yesterday." She took a step toward the window. "I don't know what to do."

"You have an investigation." He had nothing more to offer. Well, he could offer to have sex with her. Sex fixed everything, but the mood was too somber, and it didn't feel right. So, maybe it *didn't* solve everything. "There's some dumb freak out there killing people."

She was so still. "I don't care."

"Hey, look." Dexx walked up to her in three quick strides and gripped her shoulders. "I know what it's like to lose someone you love, really I do. You just—" He stopped. You just what? What wonderful advice could he offer?

She didn't even look up at him.

"You just—you live each day, you know, moment to moment. And it

kinda gets better. The moments get longer." He let his hands slip off her shoulders. "Kind of. I mean, after a while, you get numb, and it becomes easier to do the job."

She stared at him with vacant eyes. "How do you live like this?" Her eyes closed and her head fell back slightly as tears studded her eyelashes. "There's nothing. I feel…nothing."

"You're lying, Pea. You're feeling more than you can handle right now." He'd lost a brother. She'd had her daughter ripped away from her and years erased from her life. How could he compare the two? "It gets…better."

"Just do the job?" She looked up with pain and anger from the years of lies and loss.

"Yeah." His whisper said he knew it was a crap solution, but it was the only one he had. "You just do the job."

She dropped her flooded chocolate eyes.

He tipped his head at her apologetically. "I know there isn't much I can do, but if you need to talk… no, that's stupid. I'm here to help you. You want to talk? I got an ear. You need a partner. I'm your wingman. Whatever you need, I got your back." He shrugged with his hands deep enough in his pockets to keep himself from grabbing hold of her again.

An almost visible wall slammed across her features as she brushed past him. "We're dealing with a killer trying to raise a demon."

He almost wished she'd go back to the weepy Paige. A thread of fear wormed through him. Whiskey women were crazy scary when they put those walls around their emotions. "Mostly, I think they're after you."

"To raise a demon."

He followed her to the table and pulled out the wooden chair. "Your gift, you know, talking to demons and stuff. Do you know how to use it?"

She gave him a deadly serious look.

He raised his hands in surrender. “Then maybe you know which demon they’re trying to raise, now that you remember and all.”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea, but we all thought he was dead.”

“How dead? Like bounced-back-to-hell kind of dead, or dead like you’re-never-going-to-return kind of dead?”

“Even demons have souls, Dexx. In fact, they *are* souls. Angels are too.” Paige knelt beside her bag lying on the floor and dug through it. “I’m pretty sure his soul came back somehow. Reborn somewhere.”

“Rebirth,” he said, blinking at her in disbelief. “A demon. You’re serious.”

She walked to the dresser with a black candle and an incense burner. “I can’t be positive, but it would make sense. If we’re reborn, why can’t demons be?”

“What would that look like exactly?” Unease burned through Dexx’s gut as the black candle stared at him from across the room. He knew black candles could be used to bring about good magick, but it could also bring about the bad. He wasn’t a complete fool. “Would he come back as a serial killer? Are we looking at this all wrong?”

“No. We’re not. Demons aren’t what you think. They’re not what the Bible and the Qur’an tell us they are. Not entirely, anyway. They’re fighting for us.” Her matter-of-fact tone grew gravelly. “Unlike the angels.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I think you need to seriously get your head realigned, Pea. I’ve seen demons. I’ve dealt with them. They’re bad news.”

“You don’t understand them.” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “And why would you? You see a demon and the only thing you think is to get rid of them. Like Hitler with the Jews.”

“Jesus, Paige. I’m a demon hunter, and trust me. Demons aren’t soft, go-to-work Jews. They’re not living, breathing humans. A demon?

Demons want to wreak havoc. They think nothing about killing innocent people. Maybe there're a few good ones out there, but I've never seen anything to make me believe it yet. And Angels? Come on."

She snorted. "Innocent people. Is there such a thing?"

"Don't let Rachel taint you."

"Too late."

"Pea, don't go like this. There must be some part of you that sees how *wrong* this line of thinking is."

She shook her head, catching his gaze in the mirror. "Why would I see that? When we're born, we're guaranteed one thing in life. Just one. Death. Why would we hide from that? Why would we fear it?"

"Because we were also given life." He took a step toward her. "And that's worth fighting for."

"Maybe *yours* is."

His eyebrows leapt into his hairline. "Yours is too."

She narrowed her gaze as she dropped it to the candle. "Then why is there a hole in my soul?"

"We talked about that." He didn't know how to fill it any other way than hunting demons and fixing cars.

She flattened her lips, then smiled slightly.

Shit. Why did Rachel have to steal Leah?

"Yes. It'll get better, you said. Concentrate on the job, you said."

"I won't lie here. It's real hard for a while, but don't side with the demons. Did I miss saying that part?"

"They're trying to build us stronger, to make us better able to accept the responsibilities of life."

He sucked the corners of his mouth together, his jaw wide, making a popping sound as he released them. "Yeah. They're regular saviors."

She watched his reflection. "What are you doing here, Dexx?"

"Keeping an eye on you," he said with a little more anger than he

probably should have. “Your head’s not exactly in the right game here, Pea. And…” He held up his hands, not quite sure where he wanted to go with this. “You have demon activity, and if there’s one thing that’s going to have me right here, it’s a demon.”

She spun on him. “Where is it exactly, do you think?”

Alarms rang in the back of his head. He ignored them. “I don’t know, but you’re getting dangerous. Let’s talk about this. Get you back to normal.”

Her teeth showed, but it didn’t look much like a smile. “Let’s talk about normal, shall we?” Her voice was low and dangerous as she stalked toward him like a wolf. “My mother took away my child. Why? To protect my daughter from my gift. Hell, for that matter, my sister was thinking of moving out of the house to protect her kids. And my grandmother? What did she do? She told me to stop using my gift. But do you know what I do with it?”

He took a half step backwards. “Summon demons?”

“I watch them. I call them when they’re needed, and I send them back when they’re not.” She lowered her voice to a bare murmur. “I protect the human race from the things hellbent on *saving* them, and they took my daughter.”

“Paige.” Dexx reached out a hand, not knowing what he planned to do with it.

“And after Leah—” She closed her eyes and turned away, silent for a moment. “And then they took her from me, instead of helping me.”

Dexx bit his lip in the ensuing silence. “Yeah, about that. I told them to stop. It’s been my calling card for a while now, so don’t go sending any demons after me, all right?”

Paige’s face lost all color as a sickly smile slithered onto her face. She straightened. Her shoulders slid back. Her neck lengthened slightly as she marched to the dresser.

The candle shot alive with flame.

Nine Hells. *Now* what?

A tendril of smoke rose from the flame, permeating the room with a heady, earthy scent. Sandalwood.

“Pea.” Dexx searched for his bag of demon-killing gear without moving. He did not want to tip her off and force her hand. “What are you doing?”

“Summoning.”

Chapter 8

Dexx launched himself at his bag, then dumped the contents on the bed. He grabbed his demon knife.

In her reflection, the brown of her eyes receded to a near black, as her eyes fully dilated. “Balnore, I need you.”

Dexx grabbed his sawed-off shotgun—which was absolutely useless but might buy a few seconds to do…something—and his knife he’d consecrated with holy water. The black blade somehow reflected light and pulled it in at the same time.

A cloud of smoke formed in the middle of the room as the demon took the shape of a man. He had black hair feathered back from his soft, boyish face, but his stance held power. His blue button-up shirt was open and loose.

Dexx raised his shotgun with one hand, his lips flat. Balnore. He’d seen the demon around, back in Texas, before everything had gone to shit. While he’d never seen this demon actually do anything bad, he did have Paige’s ear. She trusted him. It. Whatever. Maybe this demon was the reason Paige had decided to summon demons to kill her mother in the first place.

Or maybe Rachel was.

The demon studied Dexx, a slight frown furrowing across his brow. “Peanut? Why is Dexx Colt in your room? You do remember he’s a demon hunter, right?”

“You know him?” she asked.

“He’s a reputable demon hunter,” Balnore said, his tone inferring that it should have occurred to her.

Dexx stepped forward. “Stop where—”

“I really don’t have the patience for you.” Balnore swept his hand nonchalantly.

Dexx raised one sigil-protected arm to deflect the demon magick and stood his ground. The sigil took the brunt of the blow, but Balnore’s magick was strong and came at him like a hammer.

The demon quirked an impressed eyebrow at him. “Seriously, Peanut, what is he doing here? Did you call him, or did your family?”

“He’s a friend, Balnore.”

“He’s a demon hunter who befriended a summoner only after her gift had been banished.”

A frown flickered across her brow.

Dexx fought the invisible force and gritted out, “I didn’t know you before, not really. He’s trying to manipulate you. Don’t let him.”

She narrowed her gaze. “I distinctly recall you threatening me.”

“If you lost control of your gift again. I had to try.” Even if he couldn’t actually follow through with it.

She flexed her fingers.

Dexx shoved the knife in his belt and held the gun with two hands. “You’re here for information. Nothing more. Just tell us what she needs to know so she can send you back.” He glanced at Paige before returning his gaze to the demon. “Before I do.”

The demon tipped his head toward Dexx. “This should be fun.”

Paige crossed her arms over her chest. “Why didn’t you break the bonds Grandma put on me?”

“Paige.” Dexx clenched his fist. “Tell me you didn’t summon him to dredge up the past.”

“Well,” Balnore said gently, walking over to the bed, his long, bare feet making no sound.

Dexx backed up a step, keeping the demon in his sights without giving the thing an advantage.

“I didn’t really… object to it.” He sat down and smiled up at Dexx, revealing sharp, pointed incisors.

Dexx bit down on his pride and his fear, seeing the hook for what it was. The damned demon was baiting him, daring him to do something stupid.

“It wasn’t really a bad idea at the time,” the demon said, turning his attention back to Paige. “You didn’t handle things very well. Especially for you. You have responsibilities. You can’t just hare off and”—he flung one hand in the air — “and do the things you did.”

“What exactly did I do?”

Balnore looked at her through narrowed eyes. “How much do you remember?”

“I remember everything.”

“No blank spots? No unexplained situations?”

She shook her head.

“What about the day Alma knocked your block off?” Balnore asked. “Do you remember that?”

Paige raised her chin.

“You raised a demon for the sole purpose of killing your mother.”

Emotion finally flitted across her face. Surprise.

“I went to your grandmother myself and suggested this. It was only supposed to be temporary, mind you.”

“But why did she block my gift?”

“Actually, I did that.”

“Wait,” Dexx said, taking two steps back. “I’m confused.”

Balnore folded his hands in his lap. “By which part?”

Dexx narrowed his eyes at the demon. “Isn’t she here to protect us?”

The demon nodded serenely.

Dexx pulled out his knife as he set the gun on the table. The damned thing was getting heavy. “Then why did you block her gift? To make it

easier for the demons to take advantage of her?"

"Dexx," Balnore said calmly, "try to remember that your brother killed himself."

"To be rid of the demon inside him," Dexx said, voice heated.

"He couldn't face what he had done."

Dexx's face screwed up in disbelief. "What he'd—shut up. That has nothing to do with this. Keep my brother *out* of this."

"That has everything to do with this. Demons walk the Earth to save the souls of men." Balnore winced and tossed his head back and forth as if to say it was more complicated than that.

Paige had said much the same thing. "That damned thing possessed him. It twisted his mind."

"Demons only possess to make someone face something they're hiding from," Paige whispered. "It goes back to their belief in self-responsibility."

"That demon ruined my brother," Dexx said fiercely.

"The demon was within his rights," Balnore said softly. "Your brother raped a woman and got away with it because she never had the courage to stand up and talk about it. But they heard her. We did."

Disbelief slammed into Dexx. His brother would never do something so low. "Liar."

"Enough," Paige said loud enough for her voice to bark through the room. "I need information before he sends you back."

Anger seethed through Dexx's veins.

The demon faced Paige. "I did what I had to. You were falling apart. There comes a point where facing your demons doesn't help. It hurts. With your gift, you should never have had a child. How many times did I tell you that, only to be proven right? She was used against you."

"You're telling me Rachel is on the enemy's side?"

"She's…" Balnore raised his eyebrows delicately. "She's not on ours."

“And what about now?” Paige asked. “Am I any stronger now?”

Balnore was quiet for a moment, eyes flickering over her face. “You were always going to be a power piece.”

Paige snorted. “Don’t give me more of that war witch crap.”

“Okay.” He spread his hands wide. “You asked if you were more powerful.” He shrugged. “Are you?”

“We have a killer to find.” Dexx spoke through clenched teeth, though he wanted to hear more about the war witch part. “Can you help or not?”

The demon rolled his head on his neck. “Remember what we talked about years ago?”

Paige pressed the heel of her hand to her head. “Which time?”

“In Dallas, when you asked if there was a demon convention?”

“Yeah. I guess.” She sat down. “Leah’d learned to ride her bike that day.”

“Lucifer lost control. There was a demon uprising. Do you remember why?”

“Something about The First being dead.”

“Yes.”

“The First?” Dexx asked.

Balnore offered a tight smile. “Lucius. He was born hundreds of years ago, but then Lucifer discovered him and found his soul worthy.”

“He turned him into a demon?” Dexx fingered his blade. “I thought demons were born demons.”

“Not always, no. Lucius Kane is still a man. His life has been lengthened.”

“To what end?”

“To guard the Gates of Heaven and Hell.”

Paige raised her chin, drawing the demon’s attention back to her. “Is Lucifer concerned for the man or the gate?”

“I’m not in a position to know.”

“So, what are you saying?”

“Lucius was the last guardian,” Balnore explained slowly. “Gabriel was involved in his disappearance.”

“Meaning what?” Dexx asked.

“Meaning,” Paige said, “that an archangel probably trapped Lucius somewhere in a different dimension where he’s not alive and he’s not dead. The only way to keep Lucius out of Lucifer’s hands.”

“There’s a lot of Luci’s.” Dexx rubbed his eye. “Why didn’t they just kill the man and take him to Heaven? Didn’t his soul count?”

“There, he could have been reborn.” Balnore folded his hands over his crossed legs. “Which means that if someone talked to a demon who would like to get a hold of Lucius and open the gate…”

Paige thumped the table with her index finger. “Or Lucius could be trying to open it himself.”

Nodding, Balnore raised a hand, palm up. “I’m just saying maybe Lucius is the one you’re looking for.”

“But you said he’s not a demon.” Dexx glanced at Paige. “She was nearly possessed by him.”

Balnore screwed his lips to the side. “Did you ever wonder how the human body could survive longer than a hundred years without looking like a decrepit prune?”

Dexx cleared his throat. “Why would I ever wonder about that?”

“He was given a demon soul, hunter, and the two became sort of a hybrid, of sorts. Lucius started out a man and hasn’t spent any real time in Hell, hasn’t been initiated into the demon pack, if you will. For all that, he still has demon powers. Which means—”

“He’s able to connect to Paige and possess her.”

“Huh,” Paige said, blinking. “It’s not who I thought it would be.”

Balnore frowned. “Who’d you think it was?”

Paige looked at the demon. “Sven Seven Tails.”

“Then let’s be glad it’s only Lucius.”

“Who the hell is Sven Seven Tails?” Dexx asked. He didn’t enjoy being in the dark.

Paige licked her lips and studied the demon.

Balnore bowed his head. “He’s very powerful. He has no love for humanity. He doesn’t follow the rules and has been outside of Lucifer’s direct control for a very long time.”

So? Why did any of that matter?

“We thought he was the ringleader for the demon insurgence in Texas.” Balnore took in a deep breath. “Right before Leah was taken away.”

“But you said there was no demon in the Pilmner case,” Paige said.

“There wasn’t.” Balnore’s voice was soft and smooth.

“Then…” Paige shook her head.

“It was a distraction so Rachel could make her move.”

Puzzle pieces clicked together with such ferocity inside Dexx’s head, it almost hurt.

Powerful demon.

In Texas.

Five years ago.

Demon uprising.

Angel whisperer rides in.

Takes the demon summoner out of the equation.

Demon summoning gift removed from the playing field.

Same demon.

Present day.

Brings demon summoner…here.

They needed to get Paige as far away from St. Francisville as they could manage. Now.

Chapter 9

Balnore stood and set his hands on Paige's shoulders.

She stared up at him, the weight of the world settling over her. So much had happened. Memories slammed into her mind, making it hard to think. She needed her protector and guide, her teacher, and the only one who could understand her at that moment. "What do I do?"

He smiled as he pulled away to perch on the end of the table. "Years have passed, Peanut. It's time to move on. You've got responsibilities. You need to pick them up again. The world needs you."

She dropped her gaze.

"You don't have the luxury of grieving. You have to pick yourself up and live. You don't have a choice. You have run out of time to be irrational."

Irrational? That pissed her off.

A movement caught her attention.

Dexx had come a few steps closer, his knife in hand. "Are we done here? Can he leave now?"

Balnore gestured with one hand toward the knife. "Your prize from a kill, isn't it? I've heard stories about that."

Dexx shrugged. "I do what I can."

"So do we all."

She turned to the table and stared at the picture of one of the murdered women. She blinked. Ashley had been killed because she, Paige, had had a meltdown and tried to kill her own mother using a demon. There were three people who had been killed because she wasn't doing her job. Had she remained calm and in control, would these people still be alive today? Would she have been able to control this

uprising?

She could speculate, but the case took on a much more personal tone. This was *her* mess. She was the only one who could clean it up.

A dry chuckle escaped from her mouth. Once that escaped, she started laughing so hard tears streamed from her eyes.

Balnore knelt beside her. “Paige, you’ve got to be more careful. You didn’t set up any protections before you summoned me.”

She snorted, still chuckling. “I need protection against you? You were kicked out of Hell for being nice.”

He quirked his lips in derision. “Believe none of what you hear.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Dad. I’ll be more careful.”

Balnore stood up and left in a blue, evaporating mist.

Everything going on inside her head, all the turmoil in her heart, all the guilt, all the anger, the pain, the frustration, the betrayal? It capsized, flipping the laughter to tears.

Dexx wrapped her in his arms. He murmured words of comfort into her hair, but she couldn’t understand them.

She felt, for the first time in years, that she wasn’t alone. She’d felt anger before, the height of which had driven her to summon a demon to kill her mother. She had felt frustration. She had felt *loss*.

But this? Years lost, without even asking about Leah or trying to get secret messages to her. No pictures, no presents at Christmas or cards at birthdays.

People died because of her.

Dexx scooted the both of them across the floor, then onto the bed. He didn’t stop holding her.

Her eyes were puffy and sore. Pressure built in her sinuses, giving her one heck of a headache. She lay against him, spent, feeling like a total loser.

“All done?” he asked.

“Sure.” That was a lie. There was no end to this bucket of misery, no matter how many tears she siphoned from it.

She felt his lips press against the top of her head before he rested his cheek there. She listened to his heartbeat, listened to him breathe, while his strong arms stayed wrapped around her. He just felt comfortable in a way she hadn’t realized she’d missed.

“Tell me that everything will be okay,” she said in a whisper.

“I won’t lie to you. There’s been too much of that already.”

She nodded, her eyes starting to feel like eyes again.

“But I will say that we’ll do our best.”

She felt settled for the first time in years. She felt safe. It was fragile, but she would take what she could for as long as she could. She fell asleep to the sound of his heart beside her ear.

Paige woke to the sound of the lock being turned back. The desk clock read a little after five in the morning.

Dexx stirred under her, but didn’t make any move to get up. “It’s about damned time,” he grumbled. “Alma, what took you so long?”

“We were trying to find arrangements for the kids.” Alma’s voice was gruff.

“I thought Leslie said Tru was going to watch them.”

Paige started to get up, but Dexx stopped her with his arm. It wasn’t a threatening embrace. He was offering support if she was willing to accept it. The time to put on her game face had come, but it felt so good to stay. She sank back into his arms, ignoring her numb butt. He couldn’t be too comfortable either.

Alma walked into view and stood, assessing the two of them, her shoulders hunched by age.

Paige looked up at her grandmother and pulled away from Dexx a bit as anger fueled through her. As much as she’d missed the old woman’s craggy, heavyset and leather-worn face, she couldn’t get around the

betrayal lodged in her chest.

Alma's long white hair was pulled back in a fraying braid that proved they'd kept the windows open. The old woman's eyes, one blue, one cloudy with cataracts, watched her, weighing and measuring her.

"How are you doing?" Alma hedged.

Paige wasn't sure how she wanted to respond. Yes, a few hours ago, she'd felt a world of grief, but the reality of the situation was that her grief had blossomed years ago. Time, for all that the memories had been forgotten, had at the very least dampened the sharp, bitter edge.

But this woman had raised her, had treated her like her own daughter. Alma was her mother. The betrayal was fresh, pungent, and acidic. Part of Paige wanted to handle the situation like a mature, adult woman, see her grandmother's side, understand, deal.

Another part wanted to punch the old woman in the gut and sneer as she demanded to know how it felt to be struck down by a person she trusted with her entire being.

Dexx held her close. She could feel him tip his head at the older woman, but he said nothing.

"How worried should I be?" Alma asked bluntly.

"You know what?" Dexx's voice was filled with frustration. "The woman hasn't called a demon to kill you yet, so I say win-win."

Alma raised her chin.

He gestured with his hands in a futile motion before settling them on Paige's arm and waist again. "Could we just deal with this situation like you should have a long time ago?"

Alma crossed her arms over her large chest.

"Please?"

"Hey everyone," a new voice called from the door. "Man, that was a long ride."

Paige turned without breaking contact with Dexx. Tru stood there,

looking like the nerd he was. His shaggy blond-brown hair hung below the tops of his ears. His thin nose held up wire-frame spectacles, and he wore a T-shirt with Yoda that read, *Do or do not. There is no try*. His khaki cargo shorts needed ironed badly.

"Tru, man!" Dexx twisted beneath her. "I know I told Fanny to give you guys a key, but this room's booked. Don't know if you noticed that. You three are staying somewhere else."

"Les stayed at home."

"Then what took you so long? Alma said it was to find arrangements for the kids."

"Yeah. Exactly."

Leslie didn't like being left behind. It didn't matter that she was as big as a yacht with what had to be a ten-pound baby growing in her womb. She would want to be there, saving her little sister like always.

She'd been behind the memory blockers. Though it was easier to understand her big sister's position, it didn't make it any better. Not really.

The man grinned at Dexx. "We're not messing with the mojo, are we? Dexx and Paig-ee sitting in a tree—"

Dexx cut him off with a sharp chortle. "You've been hanging around little kids way too much, man. Talk to some adults. Seriously."

Paige snorted. He was a dork, but a cute dork.

"So, then we're not messin' with the—" Tru did a little shimmy, his hands out, palms down. It looked like was mimicking a surfer. "Chemistry?"

"Nah," Dexx said with a shrug. "You know, we're just battling demons and catching killers. The norm."

The truth was, Paige did want the chemistry. She had for a long time, but they were always on a case, always working a job, and he'd kept a distance between them, which she now understood. She didn't know

how to be anything other than serious when on a case. She hadn't always been that way, but after Leah, work had become her coping mechanism.

Tru gave them a sarcastic sage look. "Sounds right." He sighed at Alma. "So, where're we shacking up?"

Paige worked the kinks out of her back. "Ask if they're full here."

"So," Alma said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "What demon's trying to take over this time?"

Chapter 10

It always came down to that. Paige rolled her eyes, gritting her teeth.

Dexx shifted under her. “My legs are asleep.” His soft murmur filtered through her ear like a warm caress. “I think we need to get up.”

She rolled off him so he could get up unhindered, tired of sitting around. “Actually, I could use a walk.”

Dexx rose to his feet, grabbing his worn assault boots.

“I’ve been driving for two days straight.” Tru let his head fall back, his shoulders bunched forward. “If I don’t sit down again for a month, it’ll be too soon.”

“A walk could be good.” Alma flicked her multi-colored gaze to Dexx.

Paige ignored the silent conversation her grandmother was having with the demon hunter. She didn’t care.

Dexx opened his palms, his eyes wide.

Well, maybe she did care. She’d needed someone just now and had leaned on Dexx, but she’d never really felt like they’d connected. She knew why now. He was a demon hunter who thought she was evil, so was he here to side with Alma? Was Paige going to lose her memories again?

He shook his head, his mouth open slightly, his jaw jutted forward in anger.

Alma raised her eyebrows inquiringly, then chucked her chin in Paige’s direction.

Anger flashed across his features. He jabbed a finger toward Paige while the other hand went to his head. He shrugged, his eyes demanding.

Alma glared at him for a long, silent moment before the bite dropped out of her gaze.

Maybe Paige could count on him.

Alma walked even to Paige. “How are you doing?”

Hurt flashed in Paige’s chest as she stepped into the muggy outside air and took in a heavy breath. “I’m fine,” she growled, not wanting to have that conversation.

They all trooped out of the inn toward the lake. Trees sheltered them from the wind that tossed the branches. The grass was full and lush beneath their feet. The afternoon sun hid behind a dark storm. The choppy water of the lake lapped against the sandy shore with little slurping sounds. Paige led them toward the tree line. No insects, no birds. Just them and the rising wind.

“Looks like it’s about to rain,” Alma said, keeping pace with Paige.

“I don’t want to disagree. I might wind up forgetting about it.” She wasn’t sure how else to answer. The sharp edge of her anger had been removed, but that didn’t mean everything was okay, and the blunt edges hurt still. If she had to work with her grandmother, she would, but chitchat? A heart-to-heart? She wasn’t ready for that yet.

“Our situation is more serious than a simple murder investigation.” Dexx kicked a rock. “And another thought hit me as I read the police files yesterday. How much of what happened when Rachel took Leah was fate, and how much of it was careful maneuvering?”

Alma shot him a sharp look. “Maneuvering for what?” She smoothed flyaway wisps of hair back into place. She succeeded for almost a second.

Dexx shoved his fists in his pockets. “To get her out of commission.”

“Explain. I don’t like guessing games, boy.”

“It’s no secret Rachel had no case. She shouldn’t have been able to take Leah in the first place. She wasn’t in the same state. She’d had no

motive, no proof. Then she'd waltzed in and took Leah without lifting a finger? That's maneuvering."

Tru's pale eyebrows shot up. "So, you're saying Rachel's a bitch because some demon made her do it? No, no. That woman *is* Satan."

Paige ran her fingernails along her greasy scalp. She needed a shower. "He might take offense to that."

"Oh my God." Tru held his hands out to her, his knees bent. "You would know. You would totally know. Can you ask him? You know, as a personal favor to me, because I could use that as ammunition the next time that crazy, psychotic bitch decides she wants to tear down my wife."

Paige bit both her lips. As much as her heart twinged at the thought of Leslie being torn down by that woman, it also felt a bit nice to know she wasn't alone.

Dexx meandered by a tree and plucked idly at the rough bark. "Think about it. What happened without Paige to watch over the demon population, to keep them in check? They could have invested themselves into politics, into religion, into the press."

"You could start a website with that." Tru kicked off his flip-flops and toed the sand. "No. Wait. I'm pretty sure there are already about a dozen of them. Did you drink the Kool-Aid?"

"Balnore warned us Leah could be used against her," Alma said. "We just didn't think they'd use her own family to do it."

Paige didn't think of Rachel as family. She only saw her as the one who had abandoned her, then taken her only child.

Alma's eyes narrowed. "Balnore's here?"

Paige nodded. "Yes."

"You're talking to demons," Alma said. Her voice inched toward accusation.

"He's a demon who was kicked out of Hell," Dexx said, his pointer

finger raised.

Tru's expression widened in disbelief. "No way."

Dexx opened his arms and shrugged an affirmative. He turned back to the tree and snapped a dead twig from a branch, swinging it experimentally.

Tru threw his head back, laughing. "That's rich. How do you get kicked out of Hell?"

Paige kept her gaze on her grandmother, assessing how the older woman would react to the knowledge she was practicing again. Part of her didn't care. The old anger of being ignored from the coven meetings and being told not to practice hadn't receded like the ache of losing her daughter. If anything, that had only grown. She almost hoped her grandmother would say something.

Alma planted her feet, squaring off with Dexx. "Do you really think there's a greater plan here than just a few murders?"

That bothered Paige. Why would there be something more going on here? Sure. She was a demon summoner, but there was nothing really special about that. Anyone, nearly, could summon a demon. Not as easily as she could, but it didn't take a whole heck of a lot.

"Yes," Dexx said. "I do. What if someone found out about her gift back then? Too many things happened at the same time. Rachel. The Pilmner case. And am I the only one who's realized the killer here in St. Francisville is using the same symbols as then?"

"In my defense," Paige said quietly as she reviewed her newly returned memories, "my knowledge of even the existence of that case had been blocked."

Tru flailed one hand, the corners of his mouth drawn down comically. "Good defense. What was special about the Pilmner case?"

"Pilmner lost his wife and two kids to a drunk driver." Paige struggled to recall the pertinent details. "They caught the driver, but let him go

due to evidence tampering. People had been bought off because the driver was a higher up in the government. The press didn't even cover his involvement."

Alma's wrinkled lips pressed tight, her shoulders hunched as she prepared to dig in for a fight. "So, you thought he was summoning for revenge?"

"I did. It made sense." Except that Balnore had said no demons had been presente even though her gift had told her there were. There was something off about Balnore, something she didn't understand. Whatever it was, she didn't entirely trust him when he said there'd been no demons. She'd known there had been.

Tru's eyes darted between the two Whiskey women. "Okay. So, what do we have in St. Francisville? What's the great plan here? Why'd they need her wobbly and dysfunctional?"

Wobbly and dysfunctional? There had to be something there.

"Lucius," Dexx said simply.

Alma sucked in her cheeks, her lips pursed, then dragged her attention to the hunter, allowing herself to be defused. Her demeanor said she wasn't done yet. "What is he?"

"The guardian to the Gate of Hell," Paige said. "Born a man, given life eternal if he guarded the gate."

Alma slid her good eye Paige's way.

"He was killed here at least a hundred years ago. I'm sort of *connecting* with him? It's my guess the killer needs Lucius's soul and the power bound to him to either open or power the key so he can open the gate."

"To what end?"

"It really depends on who our killer is."

Tru's square face filled with overload. "We're talking about the gate here, right? Like it opens and there's a legion of demons killing, maiming, pillaging."

“They’re not pirates,” Paige said.

“No,” Dexx said with mock concern, batting his bright green eyes at Paige. “They’re healers who can’t help themselves but to love and heal and bring happy thoughts to the world of man.”

What a child. “Self-responsibility, asshole. They don’t give a rat’s ass about happy thoughts.”

Dexx flicked his eyebrows. “So, now we have Paige out of commission and not keeping the demon population down. We’ve got a ‘guardian guy’ trapped somewhere around here. We’ve got a key to Hell, and we don’t know if the murderer is trying to free Lucius to use him, or if the murderer is being used by Lucius.”

Alma flattened her lips, her gaze focused inward.

“And, if that weren’t enough,” Dexx continued. “Someone knows about Pea’s gift and set a trap. I’m almost entirely certain. Like ninety-nine percent—no. Like ninety-nine-point-nine-nine percent certain the mandala was charged to trap you, to use you to get ‘ol Luce out.”

“Yeah,” Paige said quietly. “Good bet.”

The group was silent for a long moment.

Tru clasped his closed hands together. “Well, that’s all very optimistic. Go team. Rawr.”

Chapter 11

"Actually, I believe the killer wants to use Lucius." Paige didn't know exactly *how* she knew that, what clue had tipped her off. Her gut said so. That's all she had. "The killer's trying to get Lucius to possess his victims."

Dexx frowned. "That's a connection I didn't make. I don't—is that a thing?"

"The *X*'s over the eyes." How had that clicked in just now? "Not only could they signify a door, they were cut while the victim was alive." Paige ran her tongue over her teeth.

"Ew," Dexx said, rubbing his face with both hands. "Well, I can tell you one thing. We need protections for Paige."

She opened her mouth to object. This wasn't the first time he'd brought this up.

He held up a hand to stop her. "Don't even. I was there, Pea. Remember? You were downright scary."

"Before, I didn't even have control over my abilities. I didn't know what they were, or that I had them. I was just hearing voices, seeing strange things, and had no idea what was going on."

"You do now?"

"Yeah, Dexx. I do. You forget, for years before Grandma decided to take her heavy hand to my brain, I was in complete fucking control."

Alma grimaced. "You didn't know what you were doing."

Paige rounded on her. "You didn't take the time to understand what I was doing. You thought I had to be out of control, that *that* was the only thing that made sense." Paige's heart twisted as she curled her right hand into a fist. "It was easier to think a demon was controlling me,

wasn't it? Are you really any better than your daughter?"

Alma stumbled back as if Paige had hit her in the face.

A twinge of regret rattled through Paige, but her grandmother deserved it and a lot more.

"Okay," Dexx said with forced cheer. "I'm just talking about a tattoo." He flashed one of his own. "Nothing major."

Paige had control of her abilities now. There wasn't a demon she knew of who could take her down. "I don't need it."

"What kind of protections are you thinking?" Alma asked.

He bared his forearms. Protective symbols intertwined along his skin. "They work. And I think that's the only thing that kept Lucius at bay, as little as it did. Come on, now. A mandala as a trap to what? Tickle the demon summoner? No. They haven't succeeded in getting Lucius to possess their victims. They wanted him to possess *her*."

Alma looked at him, then turned her gaze to Paige. "What happened?"

"We…" Paige glared at Dexx. "…mind-linked. He was able to wake me. That's all."

The older woman stared at her in disbelief.

"Look, Grandma," Paige said fiercely. "Your actions led straight here. Made this possible."

Dexx's expression was grim as he shrugged his agreement. "She was prime material for possession."

"Fine," Alma said. "So, how does your gift work?" She put her fist on her hip. "You never talked about it before. I didn't even know if you were consciously working it."

Paige snorted. "Why would I? The people I loved were terrified of me."

Alma twitched.

Paige saw her reaction. Did her grandmother feel regret? Did she wish she'd done something more, supported her better?

It didn't really matter. Paige had to stop living in the past. Charge forward. Carefully. "I knew that's the reason Mom left with Nick when I was young. So, I kept it hidden. Bal showed up and gave me a few pointers, stuck around to make sure my gift didn't make me insane." She reached up and loosened her hair from her long braid. "Like Grandma."

Tru folded his arms over his chest, a thick frown furrowed on his brow.

Rubbing his eye, Dexx let out a long breath. "So, this, uh, gift. It runs in the family?"

Paige glanced at her grandmother. "Yeah."

Raising her face to the wind, Alma massaged her lower back. "I don't think so. We had demons stop by occasionally, but Momma, she—" Alma paused. "She killed herself. Like your brother," Alma said sharply.

Dexx recoiled, misery smothering his face.

Paige frowned at the other woman in consternation. "What was the point of bringing that up?"

Tru raised his hands, palms out. "I'm so glad I married the woman that speaks to dead people."

Everyone was still for a long, cold moment.

Dexx's sad chuckle broke the silence. He focused on the storm raging overhead. "That's seriously fucked up, dude."

Tru started chuckling, too.

Paige's lips twitched and her shoulders shook slightly.

Dexx rubbed his nose. "Okay, so besides keeping the demon population down, what else can you do?"

"I can do all kinds of stuff. I manipulate energy. I can call on all the elements."

"That shouldn't be possible," Alma said.

"Well, it is." Paige gave her grandmother a growling smile, then shrugged it away. "I can't do spells. Nothing structured. Everything I do

is…" She shook her head. "I don't know. It's primal, elemental, I guess."

Alma's expression deepened as she turned her attention inward.

"Like what?" Dexx looked genuinely interested. "What can you do?"

What would Alma do if she discovered Paige could create a natural disaster? No, some things had to be kept to herself until she could design a way to ensure her gifts would never be blocked again. "Too much to explain right now."

"To a mere mortal?"

Paige didn't want to share this with someone she didn't trust.

Dexx quirked his lips. "What else?"

"It's really easy to summon them. I have a direct link to the realm on the other side of the gate, so calling the one I want is easy. I don't have to do nearly the prep work other people do. I just stand in front of a mirror and call their name. Sometimes, I don't even have to do that."

"Mirrors are portals," Dexx said.

"Exactly," Paige said. "I can also scry to see demons and some magick users."

"You can see other magick users." Dexx frowned and folded his arms over his chest tightly.

"To know when it was safe." Paige raked her lips with her teeth. "Because it wasn't always."

Alma pressed her lips together, her eyebrows raised as if that truth hit home. "Have you scried the area yet?"

"I was a little busy."

Dexx took in a deep breath as he shoved his thumbs in his belt loops. "That's a bit of an understatement."

"Don't you need a mirror or something to do that?" Tru asked. "Les does."

Alma nodded. "Or a bowl of water."

"Les is a medium," Paige said. "And you're an earth witch. Like I said,

I'm less structured."

Dexx and Alma frowned.

Paige cupped her hands in front of her, closing her eyes. The magick came easily, as though she'd never been blocked. The energy, the power, sat there ready, but like it didn't know her. Like the time away had made her unfamiliar and a touch unpredictable. But it was ready, so very ready.

The wind came to her without hesitation. It teased through her hair, sending it spiraling all around her. Water came next; calm, cool, a hidden turmoil boiling under the cover of silence. Slow, sleepy earth yawned, stretching into her command, filling her with a distant nurturing, giving her the soul nutrition only it could provide.

The sky flashed above her as she called fire. It leapt at her in a crazy spectral dance of lancing sky-flame. The elements seeped through every corner of her being, filling her with energy, burning life back into her rather heavy, deadened heart.

Feeling crazed with the energy at her command, she concentrated on her cupped hands.

Within the confines of her palms, a globe formed. On the bottom lay a map made of points interconnected by lines. In her mind's eye, she felt each point. Red, green, yellow, and blue dots sprinkled the map.

She flattened her hands, bringing them to the edge of the sphere. She widened it and zoomed in. "Here." She pointed to a particularly red spot without actually touching the ball of magick. A white one scurried away outside of the globe. "Can you see? The red dots are demons. The blues are clairvoyants and witches. Green, healers. Yellow, generators." There were a lot of magickal people, more than normal. Well, relatively speaking. When she called up her scry globe, she typically saw a lot of blues. A lot more people were capable of seeing things that didn't quite make sense or tapping into the natural energies around them than they

thought. The percentage of witch potentials was actually pretty high, at least according to her globe.

"What's a generator?" Tru asked.

"Someone capable of creating magick without having to draw from outside of them." What concerned her, though, was that the blue dots were so bright in this area. Blue might be a common color of her globe, but the brighter the dot, the more practice and capability of the castor. Pale dots were people who had the potential they hadn't tapped. At least, that was her theory. She touched the brightest one. It grew, a face shining through it of a gorgeous Black woman with a beautiful smile. A name swam to the top of Paige's mind. Malika.

Lieutenant Mike Jones's girlfriend. Jones had been the one to request her assistance.

"What about that purple one?" Dexx asked, pointing with his chin, his hands tucked behind his back.

"That's me." Was this a lead? She'd known about witch activity in the area based on a thirty-minute headline research dive. It seemed too coincidental that the most powerful witch in the area was dating the man who'd requested she be brought out here, and then brought to a crime scene with a trap set specifically for her.

"What was the white one?" Alma asked. She didn't look pleased.

"I see those sometimes. I have no idea what they are." She always imagined they were fae. Not that they actually existed. But it puzzled her that *something* showed in her scry globe that she couldn't identify.

Alma narrowed her eyes. "Are there usually so many demons or magically inclined people in one spot? Or am I reading this wrong?"

No. She wasn't reading that wrong. "I've never seen so many in one place before."

"Is anyone besides me seeing a problem here?" Dexx bit his bottom lip. "Just asking."

Chapter 12

Something actionable needed to happen. Yes, it was great that everyone was finally on the same page, that they understood her gift—kind of—and were willing to accept it—not really—but she needed to investigate. She wasn't possessed. She had control of her gift, so she wasn't really afraid of what demons might do to her. It was time to make forward movement in this case. Someone was still out there killing people and he had to be stopped.

They went back to the inn and sweet, sweet air conditioning so she could go over the case files and determine where she wanted to start now that she remembered her special ability that might actually help with this case.

Paige talked to Fanny about setting Alma and Tru in another room. Apparently, the one right next to her was taken. She didn't really care. Alma needed sleep. Tru had a paranormal investigation he'd lined up and needed time to prepare. Tru's investigation was another reason the overly pregnant Leslie had stayed at home with the kids.

It didn't take Paige long to figure out where she wanted to start. So, with everyone settled, she was ready to move.

Dexx closed the door to Paige's room behind him. "So, where are we going?"

"*We* aren't going anywhere." Paige stashed the room key in her pocket.

"You're kidding yourself if you think you're going without me."

"I'm not going to be possessed. My gift is mine."

"Great. I'm excited. No. Really, I am." His eyes dodged around the hallway. "So, where are we going?"

She continued toward the main staircase. Dexx was the kind of man who would do whatever he wanted no matter what anyone else said. Usually, she could respect that, but at that moment, all she really wanted to do was strangle him.

The door to the room next to hers opened and Chief White stepped out, his shirt rumpled. He frowned at them both, his gaze unfocused.

"I thought you were going to wake me up in four." Dexx clapped the man on the arm as he continued to walk past.

Chief White grabbed Dexx's arm. "Why didn't you wake me?"

Dexx softened a little around the edges. "I figured you could use the sleep. Besides, Alma got in, and I needed to catch her up."

The chief ran hi tongue along his bottom lip, removing his hand from Dexx. "Is she okay?" His eyes went to Paige, then back to Dexx.

What had happened? Should she be concerned?

"Yeah. She's fine." Dexx bounced on the balls of his feet. "All's right with the world. Aren't you Pea?"

Chief White wasn't having it. His eyes narrowed as it twisted to look at Dexx sideways. "Then what happened?"

Dexx smiled widely, his hands splayed as he shrugged. "Miraculously cured."

"And…the people after her?"

Had Dexx *told* Chief White? "Are you freaking kidding me?"

Dexx's eyebrows crept up. "No?"

Her two worlds never met. She needed the respect she gained in her profession. She couldn't get that if her colleagues knew the details of the arcane side of her life. "You told him."

"He knew."

"How?"

"Let's take this discussion into my room." Chief White grabbed her arm and dragged her into his open door.

Paige let it happen, a little surprised at the man's aggression.

Dexx followed quickly and locked the door behind him.

This room was arranged similarly, but was decorated in peach colors.

"You owe me a night's rental, Chief," Fanny called as she hurried down the hall, her arms full of linens.

"I know, Fanny." He shut the door.

Paige opened her mouth.

White held up his hand, his attention on the door. After a moment, he nodded, stepping further into the room. "Fanny's the town gossip, so be careful what you say around her."

"You tell me that now?" Dexx asked as he scoped out a chair.

"What have you been saying to people?" Paige demanded. Usually, he was the king of secrets. Well, she realized he had been because he'd been trying to help keep her in the dark about her entire life.

Dexx's expression went blank. "I told the chief what he needed to know. No more."

"Detective," Chief White said, folding his hands in front of him. "I don't know what your standard protocol is here, but let me assure you, I'm not your standard chief of police. I knew what I invited into my town when I called you in, and I was aware things could get pretty odd."

Odd? Had he really just called this odd?

Chief White perched on the arm of a chair. "Also, there's the fact I saw the demon possessing you. That's not something I can erase. Nothing but the truth is going to make any sense."

Well, crap. Things couldn't work the same as they had in Texas. They obviously hadn't been working nearly as well as she'd thought in the first place. She missed her old boss, though. At least she knew how he'd react. Gathering her thoughts, she headed to the window. "So, you're okay with this?"

“I have to be if I’m going to help solve this case. I’ve already had to relieve my own investigator from the case.”

“Lieutenant Mike Jones?” His name had been all over the reports. “Did you check his alibi?”

White expelled a surprised breath. “Why?”

There was something there that didn’t quite make sense, and it was annoying her. “Why’d you kick him off?”

“His friend had been murdered. He and Ashley Fort had been best friends since kindergarten. He was never a suspect.”

Paige wasn’t so sure about that. She couldn’t put her finger on what gave her the nagging thought there was more to him than met the reports, but she wanted to chase that lead. “What did Mike show you that led you to believe you could call my chief and ask to borrow me?”

Chief White gestured with one hand. “The Pilmner case in Texas. There were too many similarities for me to ignore. The files said you caught the guy, and Mike argued that if we wanted any chance of catching our man, we needed your expertise.”

Paige dropped her gaze. “How did he know?”

“You can’t suspect Mike.”

“Let me guess. You’ve known him since kindergarten.” She didn’t understand how anyone could be so blind. She nearly kicked herself when she reminded herself of what her blind trust had led her to.

“No.” The chief took in a deep breath. “College.”

Paige clawed her hands. The small town had made him soft.

“The suspicion is there.” Dexx paced. “What are we going to do to prove this guy’s innocence?”

The chief sent Dexx a half-smile of appreciation. “Or his guilt.”

At least he was trying to remember to be objective.

“I’m not sold on this idea that Mike’s our guy.” Chief White let out a long sigh. “I’ve known him a long time, and I’ve never seen anything to

think he might be wrapped up in this. I'll give you a chance, though. Meet me at the station in a half-hour. No. An hour and a half. You'll have your chance."

What was he offering?

"And be prepared." Chief White narrowed his eyes. "I'm going to give him the opportunity to interrogate you. I hope you're wrong about this."

"Well," Paige said dryly, "that should be fun."

Chapter 13

Paige was confident she could turn the interrogation to her side. She'd done it enough times. This wasn't her expertise, to be sure. She wasn't great at manipulating people and half the time, she was owned in a conversation, but she had to try. However, with an hour and a half to kill, she had time to do some investigation of her and there'd been a few things that had popped up in the case files that she wanted to dig into further. So, she headed down to her car. "I'm checking out the occult shop."

Dexx followed. "What do you expect to find?"

"The owner is dating Mike Jones."

"The lead investigator that got thrown off the case?"

"The same guy who told his boss to bring me."

"Oh." Dexx thought about that as he got into Paige's rented sedan. "Oh," he said, as pieces clicked together.

They were starting to fall into place for her as well. "There's a coven at the heart of this, the killer is targeting me, and the lead investigator knew about me somehow. Two of the witches were victims, I think. They had a run of really good luck right before they were killed."

"And that leads you to believe they were witches?"

Paige nodded. "Most newbies start by trying to change their luck, so, yeah. I need to know how this is all connected."

"How are you going to figure that out?"

"Well," she said, putting the car in gear and heading toward town, "the signs of coven activity are present, which means a great place to start would be the local witch shop."

“What’s the signs of ‘coven activity?’”

“I just said. Some people getting really lucky while others are super unlucky for one.”

“Don’t people just get lucky, normally?”

Paige chuckled. “Maybe if you’re a man, but *that* luck typically looks like someone else putting the work in for you.”

Dexx glared at her and then shook his head.

“There were other signs, too,” she said, turning the corner. “Like how the seasons have shifted, destructive storms seem to blow around the town, the economy’s doing pretty well even though the surrounding areas aren’t. Eddie’s store is in the next town over, not here. Little things.”

“Okay, so why would the killer be after the coven? You said you thought he’d killed two of them?”

“Witches know how to raise energy and he’d need power.” She found a place to park.

“Do you think she’s in on it?” Dexx asked, releasing his seat belt. “The girlfriend slash store owner?”

“That’s what I want to find out.” Paige got out of the car, slipping her jacket on. It was hot, but she was carrying her service pistol and she’d double checked the mandate in the area. She could conceal carry even with her out-of-jurisdiction badge, but she couldn’t open carry. She’d just have to suffer through because she wasn’t leaving her gun behind. Locking the car, she crossed the semi-busy street.

People actually drove the speed limit here. Amazing.

Quietly slipping into the shop, she noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Candles, incense, pentacles, books. There was a book about deciphering dreams using the messages of angels on display at the counter. None of this screamed mastermind behind a serial killer. What would tell her? What was she looking for?

“How may I—oh, Detective Whiskey.” A lithe woman with clear brown skin stepped up behind the counter and sent her a warm smile. “I’d heard you were in town.”

“Really.”

The other woman’s large brown eyes lit up. Her full hair spilled over her shoulders in tight, dark brown waves. “It’s a small town. Everyone’s talking about your arrival. Malika.” She extended her hand. “I own this shop.”

Paige took her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same. Are you okay? I heard you were poisoned at the crime scene.”

Paige raised her chin, a smile on her lips. “I’m fine.”

“We were all worried. Fanny said you sounded possessed. What kind of poison was it?”

Malika was pushing, which could be a sign she was trying to get closer to the investigation, to see first-hand how she was outsmarting the people intent on catching her. Paige hadn’t thought she’d be stepping into the lair of the woman behind the murders, but she was suddenly getting the sense that Malika was a lot more involved than she’d thought. She reminded herself that she’d been warned Fanny was the town gossip. She needed something more. “We’re still waiting on the toxicology report.”

“And you were able to counter it without knowing what it was first?” Malika’s smile tightened, bringing out her sharp cheekbones. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

Malika’s smile was a little too tight. Was that her tell? “We got lucky. I guess I threw most of it up.”

“It’s a good thing you brought your own doctor, then.”

Paige held the other woman’s gaze for a long moment, trying to get a read on her. Was she upset that Paige had been able to get around the spell? “Indeed.”

Malika released an uncomfortable breath and looked over Paige's shoulder. "Is this him?"

Paige turned.

Dexx took a step forward, careful not to bring down the glass shelf of crystal balls. "It's tight in here. Dexx Colt."

"Doctor Colt?"

Dexx cocked a grin to the side, taking the hand she offered. "Please, just Dexx."

"Well." She turned his hand over, exposing the palm. "Let me see what you have to tell me."

Dexx kept his expression pleasant as he waited. He glanced at Paige, but returned his attention to the top of Malika's head.

What was Paige even looking for?

"You are a very driven man, Doctor Colt," Malika said, her voice soft and silky.

"I *do* have a nice car." Dexx turned a smile to Malika.

"Love is about to enter your life. As well as a new position at work."

He raised an eyebrow, pulling the corners of his lips down through his smile. He took his hand back. "It didn't say who the lucky woman was, did it?"

Malika beamed at him. "No. Tell me you're looking for something. We have a wide array of candles that just came in."

"I was just looking for a toad candle," Dexx said with a laugh.

"Oh. Well, you should check the far corner of the store. I have all kinds of humorous gifts there."

Dexx gestured with his hand and started toward the directed corner. "Oops," he called as a shelf tinkled at his bump.

"What about you, Detective Whiskey? Do you have a first name I can call you by? It seems so formal to call you by your job title."

"Detective."

Malika's eyes pinched around the outside and her smile wavered.

Paige ground her teeth through her smile, reminding herself she was plying the other woman for information. Honey versus vinegar. "Paige."

"Excellent. What are you looking for, Paige?" Malika stepped around the counter. The light breeze of her passing caused her blue summer dress to swirl around her long legs.

Nothing. "My sister has a birthday coming up."

"Oh, the medium?"

Was Malika the reason Lieutenant Mike Jones had known to request Paige's assistance? What did she know?

Malika scanned her shop. "I don't think she'd like any of this."

This section was filled with stuff Paige would never see in a West Coast occult shop. If she had to wager a guess, she'd say it was probably Voodoo, but she wasn't going to open her mouth and insert her white girl's foot. "No. She's more…"

"She's white," Malika said with a smile.

Paige returned it, not wanting to step on toes, but truth was honesty. "Very white."

Malika meandered toward the front of the store. "Do you know what you want to get her?"

Paige wasn't there for Leslie, but she was fishing. She needed to know how much Malika knew about each of the victims and if she was somehow behind the murders. If she was the one who'd led Lieutenant Mike Jones to request Paige to be set up for possession, Paige had to find a way to make the witch reveal herself. "Mrs. Fort had a tarot deck I thought Les might like." The only reason Paige even knew that was because she'd caught the corner of a card in one of the crime scene photos.

"Ashley?" Malika frowned and a second later, grief crept through her eyes. "Mike didn't tell me you'd had a chance to review her things."

What was up with the delayed reaction? “I saw it in a photo.”

“That’s odd.”

“Really? Why?”

Malika shook her head. “She didn’t use tarot. Not typically anyway, but she had two. Do you remember which one?”

“It was colorful.” What was the reason for Malika’s surprise and the delayed reaction?

“Oh, I know which one you’re talking about.” Malika’s expression darkened minutely as she turned away. “I like that one. Very simple, yet very deep.”

“That sounds like something Les would be into.” Not even a little. Leslie liked things that were blunt and obvious.

Malika stooped to look at the decks located on the bottom shelf.

What was going to make this woman slip enough to give Paige something to work with? “How are you holding up?”

The other woman stood, a tarot box in her hand. “With the craziness that’s hit our tiny town?”

“With the fact your friends are being killed one by one.”

Malika’s shoulders tightened.

Paige didn’t *know* they were all friends, or that they were in the same coven. That was a guess. “Aren’t you scared you might be next?”

“The coven was something we tried to keep hidden from the public.” Malika looked out the storefront window. “This is a very Christian town. Even in the twenty-first century, we have to be careful.”

So Paige *had* been right. At least she wasn’t slipping. “I’m well aware of the torch and pitchfork reaction.”

“You would be, wouldn’t you?” Malika moved away from the window to face Paige.

Not really. For all that Alma had told her how bad things could get, they’d managed to hide their practices well enough that no one really

suspected.

“I’m doing fine, I think. I mean, I hope you catch him.” Something flashed across her features, too fast for Paige to register. “Whoever he is, so I don’t lose anyone else.”

How many more were there to lose? “Do you know who might be targeting you? Anyone have a grudge against you, or maybe someone who wants to, I don’t know, do away with the witches?”

“Do you realize what a breath of fresh air you are, Detective? Someone on the force who understands what it means to be a witch?”

Was she trying not to answer the question, or did she not have a real answer? “I’m here now. I can help you if you help me.”

“You’ve met the people here, Paige. They might be Christian, but they’re good people.”

It seemed weird to hear that statement said in that order, but things were changing. People were getting meaner and using religion as their justification. Paige wondered if anyone remembered why they’d fought for independence in the first place, so that someone else’s religion wasn’t being shoved down their throats. “Even good people can do stupid things when they’re scared. Anyone threaten you? Is there anyone who’s a little extra-pushy on the Bible thing?”

“No. For the first time, I’ve found a place that actually feels like home.”

Could this be the reason so many magickal people were in one place?

“Besides, who do you know that would ‘convert’ us, then spread ceremonial *occult* symbols everywhere?”

“Point.” Paige dipped her chin in agreement, though her mind wandered down channels that gave reason to those very actions. Like the man who started fires so he could become a firefighter, the person who kidnapped his daughter so he could save her.

Malika reached out and touched Paige lightly on the arm. “Who do

you think this person is trying to summon?"

"Summon?" The hairs stood up on the back of Paige's neck.

"It's not a god or a demigod. It doesn't feel like they're trying to raise the fae."

Who still believed in fairies? What next? Unicorns, vampires, and shapeshifters?

"What about a demon?" Malika's eyes rounded, and everything in her expression said she was sincere.

So, why were Paige's Spidey senses tingling? "Demon. What makes you think that? All the symbols are benign."

"I've heard about this stuff happening before. I heard in another Parish, they—no. It was bad business."

Was the woman being dramatic for effect? "Demons don't need sacrifices. But they are very difficult to—" Paige cut off the end of the thought. Malika might be hiding something or nothing, but she didn't need to know what Paige did.

"They don't scoff at them, either." Malika shrugged. "It was just a thought. The magick seems hurtful, ugly, dirty."

Blood magick often did.

"Oh, hey," Malika said, her voice filled with concern as she looked out the store window. "That's Mia. It looks like she has her daughter this weekend."

A blonde-haired woman and her daughter crossed the street in front of the store.

"It was awful. About a year ago, Ron was sent to jail and his mother filed for custody. Took her away, claiming Mia was unfit. What's the girl's name? Lenore?"

Paige turned away, feeling Malika fish, waiting for the woman to slip.

Malika tapped her lip with a finger, apparently trying hard to think. "Leah?"

Paige trembled with the wave of rage that slammed into her.

“Leah?” Malika stepped into Paige’s line of sight, obvious interest splashed across her face.

Regaining control, Paige straightened. She had what she’d come for. Malika really was in on it. Any further questioning, though, would get her nowhere. The maniacal gleam shining through the other woman’s brown eyes—that’s what she’d seen before and couldn’t put her finger on.

“No. LeAnn. That’s it.”

“I think I’m done here.” Paige gestured to the box in Malika’s hands. “Leslie will like this.”

The other woman smiled, something dark slithering behind her gaze.

Oh, yeah. Malika was her suspect. As much as she hated to admit it, in this case, the witch was the guilty party.

Now, all she had to do was to determine what Lieutenant Jones knew. Was he in on it?

She was about to find out.

Chapter 14

Chapter

1

4

Chief White parked his car in the lot in front of the small station. “Okay. I’m going to take you into the interrogation room and begin the interview.”

“Okay?” She wasn’t sure what that was going to accomplish, but if she was in his shoes, she doubted she’d trust an out-of-state detective after finding out she was somehow attached to the investigation, even as a target. That would probably only incur more questions.

“I’ve invited Lieutenant Jones. Mike will be there shortly, but he might watch for a bit.”

“That’s how he works?”

The chief shrugged. “He’s not great with people.”

“That makes interviews hard.” Which was a good chunk of the workload.

Chief White grunted. “I don’t know how this is going to play out, but if you have questions, this is going to be the time to ask them.”

She had plenty.

“You ready?”

Paige nodded to Chief White, not quite sure how this was going to go. Was he really giving her the opportunity to interrogate Lieutenant Mike Jones, or was he wanting the lieutenant to crack her?

The chief turned and led her through the small station and into the

back room. A single metal table sat in the middle with three chairs, two on one side. The walls were bare with a large interrogation mirror along the far side.

Paige took the lone chair on the side with the full view of the mirrored window and wished she was better at manipulating people in conversation. “This is cozy.”

Chief White sat in the chair opposite her. He kept his hand at waist level and pointed to the one-way mirror behind him. “It’s private. If we were in my office, we’d be interrupted with the phone and people coming and going.”

He’d pointed to the window and said they were private. She didn’t know if he was telling her Lieutenant Jones was there or not. “That’s fair.” She gave him the barest of nods. “So, how is this going to play?”

“Are you feeling well?”

Did he really care? “I’m fine.”

“Even with what happened?”

She nodded, giving herself a moment to fully assess. Her memories were unlocked. They weren’t all there. She still had chunks that hadn’t fallen into place yet, but she felt more complete. She did not, however, still feel the demon inside of her. Had she managed to close that connection with the reawakening of her gift?

The door opened. A tall, slender man with dark hair and a piercing gaze sauntered in, settling in the third chair. “I’m Lieutenant Mike Jones.”

Paige nodded. “Nice to meet you.” Though, that was probably the wrong thing to say here.

Chief White folded his hands in front of him. “I just want to know what happened at the shack. Go over it nice and slow.”

Was this on or off record? She glanced at the camera in the corner and saw the red light blinking. So, this was on record. As such, there were

things she couldn't openly admit to. The world didn't know about demons and angels or witches. Well, they knew of the *fictional* existence of them, but not the reality of it. "Mold." She crossed her arms over her chest. She'd used that excuse before, and really, it was sort of weak, but with mold, everyone reacted differently. Allergies, hallucinogens, and poisonings came from mold, so it wasn't a bad one for a vague blanket excuse. "What are we doing here, guys?"

"We're just…" The chief frowned at her and shook his head in confusion. "Having a conversation."

Paige flicked her gaze to the camera and raised her eyebrows.

Chief White flattened his lips, glancing at Lieutenant Jones briefly. "We asked you to help us with this investigation."

"You did."

"I did," the lieutenant said, folding his hands in front of him. "This was my case before I recused myself."

"Why would you do that?"

He smiled and blinked, as if buying himself time. "Ashley was my friend."

"The same Ashley that's in your girlfriend's coven here in St. Francisville?"

He didn't even flinch. "What's that?" Jones pointed to her bare arm.

Why wouldn't he even react to her question? He'd stated that his Ashley, one of the victims, had been his friend and he'd all but admitted that she'd been in his girlfriend's coven. Though there were other reasons he might not react to that part of her question. But that he was more interested in the tattoo Dexx had drawn on her to help keep Lucius out? She raised it so he could see it better. "You mean this?"

"A protection rune," he muttered. "Interesting."

Why was that the interesting part, unless he was part of the conspiracy to bring her down here to release Lucius from the demon

trap? Did he know the killer? Was he the killer? Was he capable of killing his friend?

Chief White frowned at her arm, but side-eyed his lieutenant. “Protection against what?”

This was still being recorded. “Mold.” She watched Jones for any telltale reactions. “You see, it only allows the mold in so far, then it gets stopped and pushed back out.”

Jones bit his lip. “I take it the mold is out.”

Paige tipped her head and raised an eyebrow. He was talking about the demon. “It is.”

The chief’s jaw ticked as one hand curled into a fist, his gaze falling to the table. He knew they were talking about the demon too, and he knew his lieutenant was more involved than he’d originally thought.

Jones gestured toward the sigil. “Did you have this on at the shack?”

Paige shook her head. “I didn’t. It’s new.”

“Permanent?”

“We’ll see how well it works.”

Was the lieutenant the mastermind behind this? How had he learned about the Pilmner case or how to draw her out? “Jones, where were you when your friend was murdered? I mean, she was your friend and all. How were you not aware of her whereabouts?”

Jones snorted. “You’re not asking the questions here.”

“I thought we were just having a conversation.” She opened her arms, palms up. “In the interrogation room.”

Jones chuckled and rubbed his arm. “I was with Malika.”

“Your girlfriend.” Which had never been officially confirmed. It was just a conclusion she’d drawn, but one that had felt seriously cemented by the time she’d landed.

“My fiancé.”

Chief White’s eyebrows flickered.

Paige rapped her knuckles against her jean-clad knee. “Where were the two of you?”

“At her house, of course.” He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think I like your questions.”

She was as tactful as a rusty nail. That was for sure. “Is that where you killed your friend? Ashley?”

His eyelids lowered a fraction, his smile locked in place. “I didn’t kill her. I have no reason to have done *anything* like that.”

“You made Malika do it for you? Was it for a spell of some sort?”

“A spell? What kind of place do you think this is? I’m clean as a whistle, without a shred of *evidence* pointing my way.”

Chief White’s face lost its pallor as his eyes flicked toward the camera behind him. “Detective,” he warned.

She had Jones, but had to be careful what was said or how it was stated so it wasn’t thrown out in court. “That’s what *she* thinks, right? She’s a witch. That’s what witches do. They… do spells.”

Jones sat back and regarded her carefully. “Sure.”

Paige leaned back as well, throwing her arms wide. “I’m a witch too. That’s why I was called out here, right?” Placing her hands on her lap, she smiled. “My vast experience with witchcraft. I think you and I both know I don’t need the kind of evidence police use.”

Chief White cleared his throat. “Detective.”

“Chief.” She might be able to tell the jury that she’d been trying to play along. After all, witchcraft wasn’t what most people thought it was. It wasn’t dancing with devils and a ton of incantations. She didn’t need to dance naked under the moonlight and had never understood the draw.

Jones studied her arm, rubbing his chin. “Who did that for you?”

Paige ran her finger along the rune. She could stop all this nonsense. She could summon Balnore, have him appear right there in the room,

and all this would stop. The recording could be doctored or it might disappear altogether.

Or the recording could remain and then be shown to the world, and society wasn't ready to know about the true existence of witches. It couldn't handle a woman knowing what she wanted to do with her own body. How the hell would it be ready for real magick?

She let out a sigh. Summoning a demon right now was *not* a very good idea. Tempting, though. So, she'd have to do this with her personality skills, which were lacking at best.

"What kind of drugs do you like to take?" Chief White asked, standing up and rounding the table.

"Ibuprofen." Paige watched him approach, wondering what was going on. "I don't like aspirin. It doesn't seem to work as well."

"You know what I think?" Chief White leaned against the table.

She threw him a completely dead-pan stare. "That I put Jones and Malika up to murdering people in your fair parish?"

"You have a track record." He met her gaze solidly. "Every time you're called in on a *special* case, it always remains unsolved. You know what that means?"

"That sometimes unexplainable shit happens that you can't write in a report. Or like a good mechanic, when you take your car in and it behaves, when I get called out, criminals behave." Careful. Tapes.

"Do you know what our killer's next move is?"

She blinked long and slow. "That's why you called me in, right?"

Jones steepled fingers and pressed them against his lips.

"Care to share with the class?"

What did Jones need to hear? Was the chief trying to throw her a line? "The murders were to draw me here, which was the reason for using some of the same symbols from the Pilmner case. What happened at the shack was a trap for me."

Letting his hands fall, Jones kept his eyes trained on her.

That's what he needed, but the damned tapes were recording everything. "Someone thinks *I* can raise a demon for *them*."

"And do *what*?" the chief asked.

"Just for starters. I think someone wants to open the Gate to Hell."

Jones barked with laughter. He stood from his chair to lean against the far wall where the one-way mirror and the concrete wall met. So the camera couldn't capture his reaction?

"Is that the story you're going to stick to?" Chief White glanced at his lieutenant, but shifted so his back was to the camera and his detective, raising an eyebrow at Paige.

"It's about as easy to buy into the mold repelling rune, isn't it?"

The chief thought about that for half a minute, then shook his head, baring his teeth. "Cut the crap, Whiskey. I will have you detained for impeding—"

"Bullshit, and you know it!" Paige could tell the man was getting frustrated. Nothing in this case was going to be closed by normal means. Using cameras as evidence? Recording this interview? If Jones really was involved—and it looked like he was—he wasn't going to get caught by following a paper trail. "If you had anything on me, I'd be under arrest. And if you had any evidence, he wouldn't be sitting here right now. He'd be behind bars."

Chief White stood and blinked.

"Do you want to turn the camera off?" Paige asked.

The chief thought for a moment and then left.

"You really have a hard-on for me, don't you?" Jones smiled broadly and winked.

"What is it with you?" Paige leaned forward and clasped her hands in front of her. "What are you after?"

He shook his head, a cocky smile on his lips.

“How did you find out about the Pilmner case?”

“It was on the news.”

“It really wasn’t.” Before she’d lost her memories, she’d worked hard to keep it out of the headlines. “Who’s really behind this?”

“So, now you’re thinking I’m not the great mastermind?” He narrowed his eyes and shook his head.

The red light stopped blinking on the camera.

Paige took a deep breath and relaxed. “No, Jones,” she said, being real. “I don’t. I think Malika is running this show.”

He laughed. “She’s not—”

“Oh, come on.” Paige rose to her feet. “She’s a witch, and a pretty powerful one. And she didn’t seem to care that her coven was being attacked.”

The muscles around Jones’s eye twitched. “How’d you—” He cut himself off.

“A witch knows when other witches are in town. There are signs.” She stood up, ticking her points off with her fingers. “The first victim was just to see if blood magick was enough. Your friend, Ashley, was killed because she’d caught on. You’d never intended to kill her. Your third victim was different. He was carved while still alive. A generator generating power through his sacrifice.”

Jones leaned his head against the wall and smiled at her as she walked to him.

She dug into his personal space, whispering into his ear. “How did it feel to torture him? Was it empowering?”

His smile deepened.

Her heart raced. He was involved. He knew she knew, but he also knew there was no way to arrest him. She walked a fine line between the real world and the magick one. What did she want to do? Kill him? As far as she knew, there were no prisons for magickal killers. She

walked away and placed her shoulder against the opposite wall.

"You have no proof, no evidence, no… nothing."

He was right. "Do I really need it? In your world, I do. In mine?" She raised an eyebrow, leaving him with the threat. In her world, she could summon a demon to torture him. She could summon fire to roast him, water to drown him, air to suck out his soul, or earth to bury him alive.

But each of those actions had an equal and opposite cost.

"How are you feeling? Are you sure you're alone in there?"

"I am." Paige met the detective's dark gaze from across the room. "I'm the demon summoner. It's going to take a lot more than a stupid mandala to trap a demon inside my meat suit."

The door opened and Chief White walked in, his brown face pale. "I'm going to need to check your alibi. Yours and Malika's."

Jones looked at his boss as if he wasn't sure what he'd just heard. "There's no evidence."

"Yeah." The chief took in a breath that straightened his shoulders and upper back, giving him a few inches on his lieutenant. "Maybe she's right, though. This might not be that kind of case."

Thunder crashed across Jones's expression. "You're kidding me."

Chief White's expression grew equally dark. "People are being murdered under my protection. I am *not* kidding."

Jones made a guttural sound deep in his chest that was almost anger and almost pain. "Am I under arrest?"

"Legally," the chief gritted out, "I have no reason to hold you."

That wasn't entirely true.

Jones ripped open the door and stormed out.

That answered a few questions.

White glared at her as the door slammed shut behind his lieutenant. "I can't believe he'd be a part of something like this, but that man—that man was not the one I know."

Paige's eyebrows rose.

"I'll check their alibis, but, Detective?"

"Yes, Chief?"

"I want this demon crap out of my parish."

"I'll do what I can."

"And I want something on the symbols, something I can actually put in a report."

"Understood, Chief. I'll get on it."

"I take it you're well acquainted with writing feasible reports?"

She nodded.

He headed for the door. "I'm way out of my league on this one, Detective. Way out of my league."

Paige nodded. "Right, sir."

"And, Whiskey?"

"Yes?"

"God be with you."

Chapter 15

She now knew who to target: Mike Jones and Malika Banks. The question was how?

That was still a gaping hole of a question. She didn't think either of them was the mastermind. Jones did not act like a smooth, calm, cold, calculating individual capable of this level of preparation. He'd folded fairly easily with her not-incredibly-stellar interrogating skills. So, who was behind them and how was she going to reveal them?

Dexx pushed away the to-go bag from the local sandwich shop and leaned on the table in her room. "How does the new ink feel?"

She shrugged. He'd put a new mark in the middle of her back, not permanently. "It feels like nothing. Like I said, I don't need it."

"Okay, whatever. Join us on the investigation tonight since you're still spinning your wheels. Tru thinks it'll be a hoot. His words."

Paige shook her head, staring at Ashley Fort's file. "I don't do ghost hunts."

"Why not? They're fun. And"—he held up a finger—"they're not zombies."

She gave him a deadpan look. "They're ghost hunts."

"And you're a demon summoner. What's the problem?"

She let out a long sigh. She just needed something to click. If they were really after Lucius Kane, who would be after him? A man? A demon? An angel? If he was the guardian of the Gate to Hell, it could be any of them. Did she want to start summoning demons to ask them what they knew?

She didn't. A nagging part of her believed that'd been the reason her mother had been able to get sneak into her life and take her daughter.

Paige'd summoned a couple of demons to help solve the Pilmner case. It'd seemed like a good idea at the time. But now? Afterward? It felt like the price she'd paid was a little too steep. The memories of her daughter had been wiped and her gift had been bound because she'd summoned a couple of demons to try to solve a serial murder investigation.

What did that say about her, though? That it was okay to let a serial killer go free?

No. It meant there were certain lines she wouldn't cross again. Intent mattered. Actions mattered.

Dexx grabbed her hand, dragging her half-resisting out the door and down the stairs. Answers weren't going to come to her as she sat there, and going might not be a terrible thing. She didn't hate ghost hunts. They were pretty boring, though. There was a lot of sitting around in the dark, listening to the house creek with the wind and talking to air.

The sun had set more than two hours earlier. The stars shone above the tree line as the cool breeze wafted around them. The moon played peek-a-boo behind wispy clouds that did little to blot out the rest of the sky as the scent of flowers teased her nose. It was a gorgeous night.

"We'll take my car," Dexx said, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

"Aw, Jackie!" Paige grinned, putting her hands on the warm burgundy hood of the 1970 Dodge Challenger. She had some good memories of this car. She met Dexx's gaze as something clicked. "So, all those cases you helped me out with in Denver?"

He raised his eyebrows, his lips flat. "Yup. Demons, and all with you unaware." He disappeared inside his car.

Paige let out a long breath. She should be pissed, but she'd already expended so much energy on being mad, and she didn't need to take it out on the one guy just trying to help.

The car was a dream, especially on the inside. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the moment. When Dexx brought Jackie to roaring life, Paige

purred, her fingers stretching like a cat doing the happy-paw dance. She licked her lips, turning to Dexx, a slight smile on her face.

"I've never been on one of Tru's investigations."

"You—wha—oh. Huh. Right."

They hadn't driven very far before Dexx glanced over at her. "Spill it. What's eating at you?"

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Eating at me?"

He glanced in his rearview mirror. "I've seen you at your worst. You're not going to scare me, you know."

"What are you talking about?"

"You're brooding."

Paige waved him off. That's what she did: brood. "I'm working on a case."

"You forget. I've worked cases with you before. I know what *case face* looks like."

She rolled her eyes. They'd only worked two cases, but they'd spent a great deal of time together, and she'd allowed him to get close. She enjoyed his company. So, yeah. He would possibly know when something was off. "This is my fault."

Dexx's face screwed up. "It's not. Look, the—I don't understand everything going on, but how much of this could be your fault?"

"All of it," she muttered.

"Pea, you're an idiot," he said, pulling Jackie to a stop in the rose-colored gravel driveway of the plantation just behind the unmarked cop car. "You were played. That's not your fault."

"I know, but I feel like I allowed it. It's just—" She took in a deep breath and blew it out one side of her mouth. "If I'd been stronger, if I'd listened to Bal—" She closed her mouth tightly as anger surged through her. Balnore could have stopped this, but he'd been the one to bind her abilities.

“So, it’s ‘oh, woe is me. I’m human?’ Is that the pity party going on tonight?” Dexx slipped Jackie into park.

“No.” Paige glared at the emblem on the dash, fighting hard to keep the broken bits of her hidden. “Yes? I don’t know.”

“Well,” he said, shrugging with his eyebrows rather than his shoulders. “The way I see it, you’ve got two things to do here. You’ve only got to stop demons from opening the Gate to Hell and find the murderer to put him behind bars for the people who don’t believe.”

“Only.” Paige straightened her shoulders.

“And you’ve got to take up the responsibility of your gift again. Because you had all that free time. So, three things.”

She flashed him a tight smile, her hand on the door. “Thanks, smartass.”

He snorted and got out of the car.

The Metley Plantation was a beast of a house with a long front porch. The opulence of the Deep South still amazed her. For all that, the house was tall, there were only two stories and an attic. The long roofline was riddled with gables and tall trees crowded in, their branches sweeping along the angles.

An unmarked police car sat out front. Paige ducked down to see if anyone was inside. Nope. “What are they doing here?”

“As long as they’re quiet enough to not fuck up the EVP, I don’t care.” Dexx didn’t bother to stop.

Tru met them at the door. “Hey, guys. You finally made it.” He shoved a device in her hand. “Here’s your EMF reader.”

Paige stared at the little box in her hand.

“Electro-magnetic frequencies,” Dexx said with a playful smile.

“I know what it is, asshole,” she said. “When are we going dark?” Leslie didn’t do “dark” investigations. As a medium, she didn’t need to do that. If the ghosts came out at night, she investigated with the lights

on. Tru was the one who liked going dark because of his equipment.

Tru did a battery check on his own EMF reader. “Just as soon as everyone knows what they’re doing.”

Dexx took a camcorder. “I’ve got the basement.”

“I’m taking the main floor.” Tru clucked his tongue. “That leaves you in the attic.”

Uh, no. “Why aren’t we going in pairs?”

“Are you scared?” Dexx’s expression widened with mischief. “Big bad demon summoner afraid of ghosts.”

She glared at him. “You just wait. Something’s going to go wrong and Leslie’s going to hear and you’re gonna have a new as—”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tru said, his full hands raised. “No need to get all mean.”

Paige sent Dexx an evil grin.

Tru held a hand between the two of them. “I’m taking the thermal to see if I can catch anything.”

“Tru,” Paige said. “I know you’ve been doing this for a bit, but we could dirty any evidence we gather by going off in different directions.”

“We’re just sweeping. We’ll gather evidence after the initial walk-through.” He handed Paige a digital voice recorder and a handheld video camera.

“I’m sweeping with a voice recorder, a video recorder, and an EMF reader?”

“Just in case.”

“The voice recorder is going to be useless,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“Huge house, Pea,” Tru said, mimicking her tone.

Fine. Whatever. “I thought you and Leslie had already debunked this house last year or something.”

Tru nodded, taking the video camera back to check something.

“Then why are we here?”

“After the murders you got called in for, apparently the owner has been hearing noises in the attic and doors closing on the main floor.”

Paige sent him a dark, frank look. If that was the case, then maybe the killer did know something and maybe he’d awakened something he shouldn’t have or opened a door that needed closed?

Dexx gave her a lopsided grin. “Aw, you’re afraid. That’s so cute. Remember to be a witch if the ghosts scare you.”

“Dead people are weird.” So what if she’d been raised around the paranormal and strange? Ghosts scared the crap out of her. “And slightly wrong.”

Both boys laughed at her.

His shoulders still bouncing with chuckles, Tru gave the all clear to go dark and everyone went their separate ways.

Chapter 16

Paige turned the EMF reader on as she climbed the stairs to the attic and watched the readings on the red screen. Tru had given her the Mel, which she had vague recollections of hearing about, but had never used before. A wire stuck out the top, which meant it was probably directionally reliant. It also read the temperature, which was pretty cool. She jostled it around and thumped it against her hand to see if the readings would change. They did, so she had to be gentle with it as well. Awesome.

She had to admit, a geeky part of her was excited to be playing with new equipment.

The readings stayed minimal, barely twitching the needle. The highest reading was a point five, at an electrical box in the unfinished part of the cluttered attic. She sat down in the middle of the room and listened to the silence.

This was the part of paranormal investigating she didn't enjoy. The lounge time. Most of every investigation involved sitting around listening to silence. She turned on the camera and set it on the floor several feet in front of her. The light blinked red as she hit record and settled back. The other thing she hated was being on camera…sitting in the dark…listening to nothing…picking her nose. Or not. It was a thought, though. She could pick and let Tru find it later on the examination part of the hunt. She thought better of it though. That was something he could save and pull it out to embarrass her at the worst times. So… no.

She let her head fall back, waiting.

The house creaked and groaned. Something tapped the roof on the

other side of the attic. Probably a branch from the overhanging tree. She sighed. Fun.

Something touched her neck.

She swiped at it, shivering as her mind raced along with what it could potentially be. A spider. A bug. Probably just hair. Though hers was tucked into a long braid, stray hairs happened.

The Mel read at a point two. Nothing.

She turned on the digital voice recorder. “Paige, in the attic. Metley Plantation. Bored as crap. Nothing going on. Boys are elsewhere, but can’t hear them. Starting EVP session because I am so completely bored out of my skull. Thanks for giving me no one to talk to, Tru.”

She listened to the silence. Something scraped against the roof.

“Something outside,” she sighed quietly into the mic. “The wind is blowing.”

A dog howled.

Her eyelids half closed, she brought the recorder to her mouth, supporting her chin on her other hand, and muttered, “Dog.”

Something scurried across the shingles.

She yawned. “Squirrel.”

A box shifted across the floor on the opposite side of the room.

“Paige.” The voice had a soft quality as her name was drawn out.

She straightened, instantly alert, the hairs on her neck standing. “Tag this. Something just called my name. Dexx, if this is you, come out.” Though she hadn’t heard anyone clomp up those wooden stairs, and they creaked wildly.

She pointed the camera in the direction of the noise, setting it on a box beside her. The camera’s night vision showed boxes and open space on the screen. “Is anyone there?”

Something slid in front of her. She heard it. It sounded heavy, like a dresser, maybe? Wood on wood? It wasn’t a box, at least not a

cardboard one. She set the Mel down. She needed light, and the only thing she had was the flashlight on her key ring.

She dragged herself to her feet and shuffled in that direction, key light in one hand, voice recorder in the other. The floorboards creaked under her weight. She peered around a stack of cardboard boxes.

“Paige.”

“Sounds like a little girl,” she whispered into the voice recorder. “Leslie, I thought you debunked this place.”

She headed back to the Mel and glanced at the red screen. Three point five. Could be nothing, but the base attic reading had been a point much lower. “Did you die here? What’s your name?”

The room was silent.

“Please make a sound. Let me know you’re here.” She tightened her lips. “Without scaring me half to death.”

The attic door slammed shut.

Paige screeched, her eyes glued to the door. “Okay.” She tried to control her erratically beating heart. “What do you want? Can I help you?”

Something pushed against her violently. She stumbled as she raised her arms above her head. Invisible fingers dragged her toward the now-open door, the hands like icy fire scalding her forearms. Her fingers latched on to the door, closing it on her way through. The force continued to pull her down the tight attic stairs. Her foot twisted. She grabbed at the wall, the railing, anything.

She landed on her back and slid down the remaining three stairs to a landing, thunking her head against each one on her way down. Her hand caught the banister, and she lay there, feeling every step digging into her. She’d lost the voice recorder. Her keys and light were gone too. Who knew where?

She took in a deep breath and slowly sat up. She closed her eyes

momentarily.

As she opened them, the flashlight turned itself on. Three more steps down.

Her heart froze. The only way to turn the light on was to hold the button.

It stuttered and shut off.

Her chest heaved as she stood, inching along the wall down the other half of the stairs.

“Hey, what are you doing down here? Everything okay?”

She looked into the beam of Dexx’s flashlight as he turned the corner. She joined him on the second floor and picked up her keys. “Yeah. Peachy.”

“What happened? Did you miss your step?”

“Don’t I wish. Find anything in the basement?”

“Not a damned thing. You?”

“Kinda.”

Dexx took a spare flashlight out of his back pocket, pointed it at his face and turned it on. He jerked away, lighting the stairs with a grimace.

“I think I found a ghost.” Paige searched for her voice recorder, afraid to move closer to the stairs. She wanted to get as far away from that attic as she could. “A girl ghost. And she hates me.”

“Really? What did you do to piss her off?”

“Not a clue.”

“Let’s go check it out.” He moved past her to the climb the stairs.

Backing up, Paige’s heel tapped her voice recorder. She stooped to pick it up. A chill ran over her as she rose.

Her nostrils flared as she stared around the tiny landing, looking for the little violent ghost-girl.

Dexx stopped about midway up. “What’s wrong?”

“Cold spot.” Her heart raced even though she knew she’d lose cool

points if she freaked out. “Dead people. I think there are dead people around me.”

He brought out his video camera. “You talk to demons and get the willies around ghosts?” He flipped the screen. “I don’t see anything.”

Of course, by that time, the cold front had passed and everything felt perfectly normal. She shook herself and trudged up the stairs after Dexx. “I like demons better. I can at least see those.”

“Why don’t you go ahead of me?” He stepped to one side of the narrow stair. “That way, if this ghost or whatever does something, I’m here to catch it.”

“Great.” She slid past him.

“There shouldn’t be anything here. One guy was shot downstairs a bit over a century ago.” Dexx entered the attic and stood by the stair entrance. “Well, and there’s a mirror with a creepy face that sometimes shows up.”

“That one’s easily debunked.” Paige looked at the Mel meter, but couldn’t make out the reading. “I don’t un—” Her feet left the floor. She flew across the room. She hit a beam and landed on the floor with a loud thump.

“Holy shit! Paige, you okay?”

She hurt. Every muscle in her body felt bruised. She lifted her head. Her flashlight lay on the floor between her and the door.

Dexx scanned the room with his camera as he approached her. “Pea?”

“I’m fine.” Her voice quivered. The cop in her told her to stay, figure out what was going on, but she wanted to get the hell out of there. “Let’s go.”

“Yeah. I think that might be a good idea.”

Together, they gathered her gear and walked carefully out of the room.

“I want to know how she got here,” Dexx said quietly in Paige’s ear as

they eased down the rickety, narrow stairs. “She wasn’t here the last time.”

“Could be she just never decided to show herself.”

“Yeah, but who is she? She didn’t show up on any research. Like I said, there was only the one guy.”

“What about some little girl who got really sick and just died?”

Dexx moved around her as they moved to the main staircase. “Nope. All the kids that lived in this house lived to move out and die at ripe old ages.”

“No childhood deaths?” she asked. “At all?”

“None. Let’s go find Tru. There’s one more spot I wanted to check before we left for the night, but I thought it might be best if we tag-teamed this one.”

“This is why Les insists on going in teams.” Paige descended the stairs to the main entrance, her entire body shaking. The night had just begun, and she was ready for it to be over.

Chapter 17

Paige and Dexx stopped when they reached a large sitting room.

Tru stepped out of a different room. “Find anything?”

Warmth from Dexx’s fingertips seeped into the cold base of Paige’s lower back. “You are going to piss yourself when you review the tapes.”

“Really?” Tru’s face lit up like someone told him Santa was real. “What happened?”

“Paige was attacked.”

“Holy shit. Paige, are you okay?”

She nodded, the slight movement tugging on her sore neck. “Yeah, but I’d sure like to be done now.”

Tru winced at Dexx. “We could check out the cellar later, another day?”

“We could take her back to her room.”

“I’m not staying by myself, guys. I know I’m a big girl, all grown up, but I am not staying by myself.”

Dexx shook his head. “Nope, you aren’t. Not after that.”

Tru screwed his lips to the side, his expression folded in worry. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

He did care. How sweet. “Banged and bruised, but good. Frightened as all hell.”

He released a puff of breath. “Okay. Well, I suppose me and Dexx can just come back tomorrow night.”

Dexx glanced at her. “You want to break down or keep it set up?”

“Keep it set up. I’ve got the whole weekend. I was just going to record and see what I came up with. You won’t believe the equipment I’ve stashed around here.”

Paige set the Mel and the camera on the table next to her, her hands still shaking. Shaking? Seriously? She hoped the boys didn't notice. "You know what? We're here. Let's just do it."

"No." Tru went to the corner and laid a hard-sided case on the floor, popping it open. "You were attacked."

"Typically, that means go investigate." Paige crossed her arms.

"I've got cameras up. Safety first." He turned back to his case, stashing the handheld equipment. "Les is already going to kill me."

Paige shook out her hands and feet. "No. Come on. Just really quick."

Dexx and Tru exchanged a look.

"Okay," Tru rose from storing his electronics. "If you're sure. Really, really sure."

"We're paranormal investigators tonight, right? Being pushed by invisible people is part of the job description."

"Actually, not really. You were pushed?" He opened the front door for her and Dexx. "Seriously?"

"Like he said. You're gonna piss yourself."

They walked out of the house and around to the side. The night was quiet and cool.

Tru threw open the large wooden doors leading down to the cellar.

Paige paused. "Do you hear that?" There was nothing to hear. No sounds. No cars. No insects. No breeze. Nothing.

Dexx met her gaze in the near darkness, one eyebrow raised. "Something's going on."

Paige stared at the slave shack she knew was out there beyond her sight. "Connected to the case, or an anomaly?"

"Now that's a damn good question." Dexx walked down the cellar stairwell.

"Aw, fuck." She descended the stairs after Tru. Solid earth met her feet at the bottom. Shelves lined the walls. Dust and old musty

stagnation choked the air.

Dexx touched one of the jars on the shelves that looked as though they'd been around since before the Colonies. "So this is what happens to…I can't even tell what these are."

"Guys," Tru said, his eyes glued to the screen. "You've gotta see this."

They walked to his side. The screen of the thermal camera showed everything in the room in hues of the heat-directed color spectrum. The solid walls were a brilliant red. However, the far corner blazed white.

"What the hell is that?" Paige asked.

"Let's get some readings." Tru grabbed the EMF reader from his pocket, handing the thermal imager to Dexx. He started his sweep away from the odd corner. "Base reading of the room is a point five. But the closer I get to that corner, the hotter it gets. Three point two. Three point eight."

Paige edged toward the far corner, her body tight. The cool touch of the night dissipated as she drew nearer. She found it harder and harder to breathe. "Do you smell that?"

Dexx shook his head. The screen of the thermal camera cast a green illumination on his face. "Over the dirt?"

"It smells like something's dead," Tru said, standing just behind her.

"Sulfur." Dexx's hand shot out and grabbed Paige. "Demons."

"Great. Something I can deal with." Though she didn't feel strong enough to deal with them. Not at the moment.

"I got a bad feeling about this, guys," Dexx said. "Let's pack it up."

Tru shined his light on Paige. "You don't look so good."

"It's just—" She tried to wave them off, but her chest constricted. Spots of bright light scattered before her eyes. Dizziness attacked her. Voices intruded into her mind. An invisible force slammed against her mental shields. Visions flashed behind her eyelids.

"Sit down." Dexx pulled her toward the old wooden steps.

The voices crowded inward, forcing her thoughts in every direction. “Dexx, something’s wrong.” She leaned back on the steps, closing her eyes.

Dexx looked at Tru. “You catching anything? Is this a demon, or can you tell?”

Tru pulled another camcorder out of one of his other pockets. He turned it on and placed it on a shelf, pointing it to the corner. He pulled out the LCD screen. “I got a shadow. Maybe we should just go. Let the evidence talk to us in the morning.”

“Could the shadow be one of ours?” Dexx swiveled his gaze between the camera and the empty corner.

“Nope. Not us. Dude, I’m spooked, and I don’t spook.”

Dexx returned his attention to Paige, a worried frown furrowing his brow. “How often do people get pushed? Violently pushed in a house your wife cleared?” His gaze flicked in the direction of the far corner. “Set your shit quickly. Time to get out of here.”

Tru stopped his EMF reader out in front of him. “This thing’s spiking. The energy’s building. We’re in double digits. Guys.”

“My arsenal’s in the trunk of my car.”

“We’ve gotta go!”

Paige shuddered, her entire world shrinking. Dexx’s and Tru’s voices sounded like they were underwater.

“Let’s get her out. Now.” Dexx took her arm, shoving her up the stairs.

A guttural roar echoed through the room.

Dexx stumbled. “What the fuck?”

Paige’s world tilted, angled to one side. Sound sliced through her head like a knife; a river, a tree breaking, a car door, a woman screaming.

“What the hell are you doing, man?” Dexx shouted.

Chief White stood at the top of the stairs, one of the doors of the cellar in his hand. “You’re not going anywhere.” A crazed gleam boiled

in his eyes as he let the door drop.

Scrambling up the remaining steps, Dexx leapt through the other door, tackling the larger man to the ground and from sight.

Tru's eyes widened. "Shit." He pulled Paige into the cool night air. Her mind began to clear, but it felt sluggish.

White leaned over Dexx's prone form. He turned toward her, his face twisted into a crazed mask.

Paige's mind worked as if being dragged through mud. She heard… something. Someone spoke to her, saying something she should understand. She blinked lazily.

The tall, dark man came to her, picking her up by her upper arms. He held her that way for a long moment, her feet dangling off the ground. His eyes narrowed with fury. "You won't be dashin' off, love. We can't have that, now can we?"

"Fuck." Dexx stood up, holding his abdomen. "Tru, man, you all right?"

"Oh, shit." Tru's eyes were glued on Paige and White. "Is that—that can't be—"

Dexx started toward White.

The chief threw Paige down the stairs as if she were nothing more than a ragdoll.

Each step bit into her body as she hit it; back, leg, back, arm. Her foot kicked one of the many shelves. Her head slammed against the hard dirt. Dazed, she watched in stunned and almost detached amazement as the doors slammed solidly shut.

Lightheaded, she dragged herself painfully to her feet. Dear God in hell! Her head.

"At last," a rich, darkly masculine voice said in a slight accent. "My release from this torment. I can stop them now as I could not before. You shall be my instrument. You will save lives."

“No.” Paige swayed where she stood.

A glass jar levitated in the far corner. It paused for a moment before racing toward her. Paige raised her hands to protect her face, but the jar hit her head, shards of glass raining down on her as she crumpled to the ground. A horrible odor covered her. What had been in that jar? Cold leeched into her, where the foul liquid made direct contact with her skin.

Pain iced through her face and arms. Daggers of fire lanced her back where she lay on pieces of broken glass. The pitch-black room was silent.

She felt a sharp ache in her left ankle where she had twisted it on her way down the stairs. She heard a loud thump on the cellar doors. Tru shouted her name, but the heaviness in her chest wrapped tighter, cutting off any air.

She lay there dazed, helpless and unable. A pungent odor sent her consciousness scurrying deeper into the far caverns of her mind. A cold, invisible hand caressed her arm. She whimpered.

“I will not fail this time, love,” Lucius promised. “Your sacrifice will not be in vain. I will keep the gate closed.”

“Not through me,” Paige said softly. She stared into the darkness, fighting for control of her thoughts and emotions. “Not through me.”

“Yes, love. I’m very sorry. Through you.”

His arms wrapped around her as he pulled her into his ethereal lap. His presence seeped through her skin, deep into her body. A branding iron of will pushed her back deeper and farther away, severing the connection between her body and her mind. No!

His ethereal hand brushed against the spot on her back where Dexx had traced his protective mark. The assault paused, retracted, and then hit her full force, pushed at her soul, tearing at her with a ferocity she had never felt before.

The harder he fought, the more ground he lost, power leeching from her tattoo. With a growl of rage, he flung himself away from her, disappearing from the room, from her thoughts, from her heart, and even from her gut.

She collapsed onto the ground, air finally filling her lungs in huge gulps. He was gone.

But for how long?

Paige's breathing slowed after the demon-not-demon left. Pain coursed through her everything and her best move was to do nothing.

Dexx would show up soon. Or Tru would. *Somebody* would.

The thought that *somebody* should hurry up settled with her as blackness crept in from the edges to take her into nothingness.

Chapter 18

Dexx sank into the chair beside Paige's hospital bed.

The EMTs had tried reviving her at the scene, and again in the ambulance on the way to the clinic, but no luck.

They'd just brought her in, and they weren't sure what else to do with her. Another emergency had popped up and needed rescue. A shooting. That trumped a comatose woman who might simply be sleeping.

Sleeping. Dexx didn't know what to do. She looked like she'd lost thirteen rounds in a match with a heavyweight. Her wet and straggly hair had a thick, bitter, slimy aroma that he actually tasted. Had something been dumped on her? It had to have happened when she'd been alone in the cellar. Maybe that was why they couldn't wake her.

A dark dread grew like a fast-moving storm in his chest. He needed help. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and scrolled through the recent contacts.

"Mmm?" Leslie mumbled.

"I need your help."

"Hello to you too. Do you have any idea what time—Jesus, Dexx. It's three o'clock in the morning. Don't you have anything else better to do? Sleep is a precious thing."

"Yeah," he said. "Paige was coated in an oil of some kind, and she won't wake up. I don't know if it's connected. Besides, it's four here. Rest is for the wicked."

Leslie rustled around. "I'm lost. What happened?"

He ran his fingertip over Paige's forehead, then rubbed the oily substance between his thumb and forefinger. "Looks like she was doused in something. She was attacked by a ghost before that, and then

something strange happened in the cellar. Could be possible possession? Though nothing like I've ever heard of before."

"What?" Leslie demanded. Her alarmingly alert voice blared through the phone. "I need information. Now."

Dexx wiped his fingers on his pants. Whiskey women. They scared the crap out of him. "We were investigating the haunting of the Metley Plantation—"

"Nothing out of the ordinary there. We cleared it. Paige went with you?"

"Yeah."

"That's out of the ordinary."

"We hit a wall in the case, so I figured this would be a good, safe distraction for her. It should have been a clean investigation."

"But it wasn't?"

He ran his hand over his head. "Things were active, Les, and it was centered on Paige, and then when we went down to the cellar, things got fucking weird as shit."

"Define 'fucking weird as shit,'" she said in a hard tone that sent gooseflesh down Dexx's spine.

He swallowed hard. "We saw an anomaly on the thermal and the EMF spiked hard. Then, Paige started acting weird. Oh, and then there was the thing with the cop."

"What thing with the cop?"

"He—well, he, um—hmm." How to say it out loud while remaining alive? Could mediums kill people over the phone? "I think he was possessed. I talked to him afterward, and he didn't remember a thing. He's okay now and looks like he won't have any lasting harm. I sent him home to sleep it off, though."

The line was silent.

Dead silent.

Dexx began to sweat. “Look, we had no idea a demon would show up on a ghost hunt. Okay? Could you not kill me?”

Leslie didn’t answer.

His eyes flickered around the pale blue room. “Please?”

She didn’t breathe, didn’t make a sound.

“Pretty please?”

“Was she okay before she was doused?”

“Yes.” Relief swept over him. “She was a bit freaked over what happened in the attic, but—”

“What happened in the attic?”

“She was attacked by a ghost.”

Her voice rose a considerable amount of decibels. “She was attacked by a ghost? Are you freaking kidding me?”

“No. Hey, inside voice. You’re in my ear and you’ll wake the kids.”

“Don’t worry about my kids. So, you have a ghost attacking a demon summoner in a place with no *ghosts*. Are you two *boneheads* fine? Were *you* attacked?”

“Nope. The thing completely ignored us boneheads.”

“And you’re telling me you went in teams, or did you decide to go in like lone wolves?”

“I was up there with her.”

“Before or after?”

“Um.”

“Uh-huh. And after she was doused with the whatever, how’d she act?”

“Confused and drugged.”

“How’s her gift? You’ve been with her a couple of days.”

“It’s back. It’s back, Les, and it’s working well, as far as I can see. And her memories are… intact.”

Leslie paused, her tone hedged and deep. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, she’s handling things well emotionally, I guess, except for not talking to Alma. She’s refusing to do that. But she summoned Balnore like she never quit, and then there’s that globe thing. Did you know she can see all creatures of magickal ability?”

“Yeah. It was actually the one thing I’d hoped she’d be able to keep.”

“Oh.” He frowned, staring at the blue blanket under Paige’s jean-clad legs. “Well, she’s good, not good. Her gift’s under control when she has control.”

“Okay,” Leslie said. She made a clucking sound with her tongue. “Sounds like someone set up a trap for her.”

“No shit.”

“Shut it. Could be a lot of things, though. Grandma’s best with the herbs, so make sure she gets her hands on whatever they threw at Pea. How’s she now?”

“Uh.” He puffed his cheeks out.

A nurse bustled into the room. “Let’s see if we can wake her. If not, the doctor will want to run some tests.”

Dexx shot her a grim smile. “She’s comatose. I need help, Les.”

“So, it hit her hard, whatever it was.” Leslie growled low in her throat. Her phone picked up the sound really well. “It had to be primed for her. That’s not good, Dexx. We should have never blocked her. I should be out there.”

“Probably not a good idea. You’re like ten months pregnant.”

“It only feels that way. I’ll call Grandma and have her meet you there.”

The nurse shined her pocket light in Paige’s eyes, moving from one eye to the other.

Dexx rose from the edge of the bed, unwilling to leave the room. “Les, what do I need to do in the meantime?”

“Where are you?”

“At the local clinic.”

“Do they have showers?”

Dexx lowered the phone to his chest. “Do you have showers here?”

The nurse looked up. “No. We usually don’t have people stay that long.”

“That’s a big no,” Dexx said into the phone.

“Well, get that stuff washed off her somehow. Get her into a clean set of clothes. Wash her hair. And I’ll get Grandma to bring some feverfew.”

The nurse pulled a small capsule out of the large pocket on her white and pink scrub shirt.

Dexx had seen one of those in a movie or something. Was he going to have to invest in smelling salts? Was that even a thing he could buy? “Would she have feverfew?”

“I hope so,” Leslie said. “Call you back.”

The nurse, breaking the capsule, waved it under Paige’s nose.

Paige jerked her head away, her eyes blinking open.

Dexx closed the screen. “Nurse, we’re going to need to use your bathroom, and we’re going to need one of those really fancy paper gowns you guys like to give out.”

The nurse frowned. “Why?”

“She was doused with an oil, and I think this could be an allergic reaction. And it may have ruined your pillow. ” Dexx put his hand on Paige’s shoulder to keep her in the bed. “I think we should wash that off first and see if she has any further reactions.”

The nurse sniffed Paige’s hair, her lip curled. “I’ll help her with that. You need to leave unless you’re her husband.”

“I am not.” Dexx shuffled out of the room, ignoring the twinge in his heart. Husband. That thought had never crossed his mind, but this was Paige. He should be able to help her. Out of her clothes. Right. “I’ll be right out here.”

Alma bustled down the hall with Tru in tow not long after. “Where is she?”

Dexx cocked his head to the door behind him.

Alma shifted a heavy bag on her shoulder. It looked like a cloth grocery sack everyone and their grandmother used. “How is she?”

“Awake. The nurse is cleaning her up.”

“Is she coherent?” Her Texas drawl thickened as her voice lowered minutely.

“Couldn’t stay. The nurse is a sergeant.”

“Good for her.” Alma pushed Dexx out of the way and stormed into the room. “Hello. Alma Whiskey. I’m her grandmother. I brought some clothes—”

The door closed, shutting out any further conversation.

Tru shoved his hands in the pockets of his wrinkled cargo shorts. He looked around uncomfortably. “Weird being in a hospital and not having someone trying to break my hand.”

Dexx chuckled and leaned against the doorjamb, folding his arms over his chest, keeping guard. Tru might have good memories of hospitals, but Dexx didn’t. The smell. The look. The sound. He’d visited his brother in the hospital. He’d been in a hospital when his brother had died. All Dexx wanted to do was grab Paige and get her out of there, get her somewhere safe.

The doctor appeared from the down the hall. “Excuse me, son.”

Dexx let the man in. With each passing minute, his heart raced faster, his blood boiled hotter. He fought not to react. Paige was safe. She’d be okay.

She’d be safer in their room behind his protections.

She’d be safer in his arms.

Dear God. What was he thinking?

After a few minutes, Alma exited the room, followed by the nurse,

who quick-walked to another room. Alma ran a shaking, gnarled hand over her frizzy white and black hair. “She’s asking for you.”

Dexx entered the room to find Paige sitting on the bed, her skin slightly pink. He resisted the urge to gather her in his arms, to rock with her. She was the closest thing he’d had to a real friend. When they were apart, he missed her smell, the noises she made when she was lost in thought, the constant clicking of a pen when she was confused. He didn’t want to lose her.

He shook himself and took a step back. No. He had to stop thinking like that. It was just the hospital playing with his mind. Or the fact that he’d nearly lost her that night. Or…no. She was a demon summoner. He was a demon hunter. What kind of relationship did he really think they could build?

“She has a mild concussion, bruised ribs, a sprained ankle, and several minor lacerations,” the doctor said.

“Does that mean I can leave now, Doc?” Paige jutted her jaw to the side. She tucked a wet strand of hair behind her ear.

The doctor sighed. “Well, I guess if you still want to leave, you can. But I don’t recommend it. I think it would be best to stay for observation.”

“I’ll be fine, Doc. I can’t lie around just to lie around.”

“Sounds like someone’s got a hero complex.” The doctor took a pen out of his jacket pocket and picked up the clipboard.

“I have a killer to catch.” Her tone didn’t leave room for argument. “I don’t have time to sit around. I’ll heal standing or sitting. I’d rather be standing.”

The doctor looked at Dexx. “You make sure she at least gets a good night’s rest. I mean *rest*.”

The images of Paige lying in bed ramrodded through him. He swallowed hard, pushing down the heat rising in the lower regions of

his body. “You said she has a concussion. Is it safe for her to sleep?”

“It’s minor, so it’s the best thing for her. The body’s an amazing thing when you let it work as it wants to.” The doctor slipped his pen away and bustled from the room.

“I’ll do my best,” she did to the closing door. She still looked beat to shit, and the only thing he could think about was protecting her. “I’ll do my best.” She lay back in the bed and closed her eyes. “I’ll be ready in a minute, then we can go back to the hotel.” She was asleep in moments.

“Sure. I’ll get right on that. She can start that rest right here.” Dexx carried her out to the car and drove to the inn. He carried her to her room and set her in bed like she was Sleeping Beauty.

He was tired too, but something had his mind buzzing. Maybe more than one thing, but he couldn’t pin anything down.

He pulled out his demon knife. He’d collected it after his second demon encounter. The first didn’t leave him in good shape, but he’d recovered and learned. Learned well enough that the bastard left the knife after it ran. He set one of the two points down to the counter. It left a deep gouge without him pressing. Wherever it had come from, it was *sharp*. Two blades turned back-to-back and blacker than a cave. He’d taken it to a huge Catholic church and had bathed it in the holy water there. He got a few looks, but at least his knife from a demon encounter had holy water infusion.

He pulled the knife from the counter and studied the blood red edge. It hadn’t been any help against a ghost. How could he protect Paige with it?

Did her powers mean an escalation? He’d seen that before.

Rachel was pure evil, and Leah should never have been taken from her, but if Paige had never lost her power, would they still be at the beginning of the race, or would things be… worse?

He put the knife away and took Paige’s hand. She stirred but didn’t

wake. Her skin was cool, just the way he liked it. Soft but not squishy, and long but not bony. Just a few short years passed and the woman whom he didn't trust was… well, she was a large part of his life. In his time hunting demons, he'd learned to fear the law, but not her. She was different, she was…

She was a Whiskey.

He rubbed his thumb over the top of her hand. Ghosts, demons, possessions, magick. He wished he was more part of the world she lived in, but did he want power, and the responsibility that came with it? Sure, he could handle it, couldn't he?

That bed looked more and more inviting. Paige didn't take much space, and he really needed some horizontal time. Maybe he could just see… no, just some down time. They'd been strung through the ringer and sleep called like a bill collector.

Okay, enough. He slid into the bed and collected Paige into his arms. The shared body heat had him lulled in moments.

Suddenly, the feel of eyes on him sent his hairs standing on end. He was being watched, but from where? The blinds were down, and the curtains drawn, the door shut. So where was the watcher?

Something brushed his mind and was gone.

Sleep wrapped him up, and he forgot about the eyes and the watcher.

Chapter 19

Paige woke up sore, sunlight slanting in the windows. How had the doctor put it? Beat to hell? Yeah. She felt it. Her arm bumped into Dexx lying beside her on the bed. She pushed not-so-gently on his shoulder. “Get your own room.”

He smiled sleepily and rolled over, pinning her to him with one arm. “But I like it here so much better.”

“Good grief.” She shoved him off, her body complaining as she dragged herself out of bed.

Her memories of the night before were chaotic, almost as if she had lived through a tornado. A part of her mind struggled to rationalize everything, to tuck all the memories into neat little files, but the events of the previous night refused to obey.

Someone banged on the room door. She finished brushing her teeth and stepped into the room, limping slightly. Her ankle still hurt, but not nearly as bad as the day before. A couple of ibuprofen and she’d be set.

“Dude.” Tru pushed into the room. “You have so gotta see what we caught.”

Dexx frowned, barely awake. He glanced at his watch. “Have you been at this all night?”

“And all morning.” Tru wiggled his eyebrows with a sly grin. “It’s nearly noon.”

“No wonder I’m so hungry.” Dexx’s bare feet made no noise on the lush carpet on his way to the coffee pot. His jeans fit him loose. His bare abs and chest gave off a healthy glow in the light filtering through the curtains.

Paige blinked, leaning her shoulder against the doorframe. And that

had been in her bed all night. What was she doing? Good grief!

What was going through her mind? Seriously? As if she had time for that.

Though *that* was sex, and sex was good for the mind, the body, and the soul. It was good for the—"Coffee?"

She bit off her thoughts and nodded.

Tru watched both of them through mischievous eyes.

Paige ignored her brother-in-law. "So you're done watching all the evidence?" She threw open the curtains of the nearest window.

"Damn." Dexx threw up a hand to shield his eyes. "Could you warn a guy next time?"

"What are you?" Paige moved to the other window, her ankle loosening up with movement. "A vampire? Do I need garlic to keep you out of my bed?"

Dexx raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"Didn't go well, huh?" Tru asked with a cynical smile on his face.

"I was tossed around like a friggin' rag doll last night. Thrown down two flights of stairs. I'm also pretty sure someone tried to possess me. Jensen Ackles couldn't have gotten lucky."

Tru pointed his thumb in Dexx's direction. "He kinda reminds me of Jensen Ackles. You know, with that ruggedly strong chin, and the stubble, and the really bad fashion sense."

"Says the man who wears white socks with his flip-flops," Dexx said, his hands spread.

Tru held up his hands in surrender. "I still got a bit more left. So, when you sleepyheads are ready, come see me. I'll be down the hall. In the opposite direction of the stairs, so no worries about falling down. Again."

"Gah!" Paige picked up a shirt and threw it at him. "Get out!"

Tru laughed and closed the door behind him.

Good grief. It did feel good to banter with him. She stared out the window. The gentle waves of the lake winked in the bright sun. The green leaves rustled in the wind. Clouds danced in the sky, changing form before her eyes. What would Leah say about—

She sank into the chair next to her as her heart twisted with grief. She put her elbows on her knees, burying her face in her hands.

"Pea," Dexx said softly, sitting in the chair opposite of her. "Leah? You only do that when you remember."

She scrubbed her face hard and sat up. She had a case to solve. She had to be okay. She couldn't let people down. Again. "Yeah."

"Don't."

She cleared her throat and frowned at him. "What?"

"I know where you're headed and trust me when I tell you, it ain't pretty."

Paige took a lock of long brown hair, pressing it to her lips for a long moment before letting it drop. "Yeah. I know. You hear from my brother? Do you know how she's doing?"

"No, and I'm sure Leah's fine."

The pain inside Paige's heart coiled, waiting. "Sure. Coffee ready? Let's go see what Tru found."

He stood, grabbing the T-shirt from the floor. He brought it to his nose before pulling it over his head while Paige filled the two mugs. She handed one to Dexx and waited as he doused it with about five creamers and half a shaker of sugar.

"Did you want a little coffee with your sugar?"

"Shut up." He sipped his concoction as he exited the room.

Alma and Tru's room had two single beds done up in shades of blue and brown. It felt very warm, but not quite as earthy as Paige's. She glanced at her grandmother lying on one of the beds. The woman looked like she hadn't slept in days. Tru camped at the lone table

against the wall next to the window. He had two laptops set up and other equipment Paige couldn't even begin to name.

"What do ya got for us?" Dexx asked, sitting down next to him.

Paige perched on the edge of the empty bed.

"Okay, well, first off," Tru said, glancing at them both with wild excitement in his grey eyes. "Paige, I caught the sound of something sliding across the floor in the attic. And I caught what you thought you heard. The first time the little she-ghost called your name, that's all I caught. You heard that, so I don't have to replay it for you, but listen to this."

Tru handed a set of headphones to Paige and another one to Dexx, his expression rife with excitement.

"…you're here. Without scaring me half to death."

The attic door slammed shut.

"I won't go back," the little girl's voice said.

Paige shoved the headphones off, her heart racing. "That was very clear. No confusing anything there."

Dexx tucked one cushioned cuff behind his ear. "Where won't she go back to?"

"Who is she?"

"I don't know," Dexx said. "But there's no record of any girl dying there. I can tell you that. So…" He trailed off with a shrug.

"Well, I can answer part of that." Tru pointed to their headsets. He waited until they'd put their headphones back on before clicking to another screen.

Static. "My name is Jessica Camley." The girl's voice came out garbled, but easy enough to understand.

"Wow." Paige's hands shook as she exposed one ear. "How often do you actually get answers from a ghost?"

Tru beamed with excitement. "Where did she come from?"

“That name didn’t come up in the research.” Dexx played with the headphone cord. “It’s like she came out of nowhere.”

“I have more. When we got to the cellar, catch what I have on the digital recorder.” He unplugged the multi-headphone jack and turned up the volume. “This guy is easy to hear.”

A voice riddled with static said, “You’ve got to listen to me, love.”

“That’s the guy.” Paige set her headphones on the bed beside her. “Lucius Kane.”

Tru gestured to the headphones, telling her to put them back on.

With a frown, she did.

Nodding, Tru clicked his mouse, and a white noise filled her ears. “Things are going to happen tonight.” Static warbled his next sentence. “Do not fight me when I come.”

EVPs were weird. “I didn’t hear that last night.”

“Maybe because he’s a ghost?” Dexx asked. “A demony ghosty thingy-ness?”

“You need to be careful,” Alma said, her tone hard. “I don’t like this.” She sat in her bed, scooting back until the headboard supported her.

“Right, and she really didn’t like what I’m about to show you,” Tru said, closing that file and opening two other windows. “Look. This is the thermal recording I took while we were down in the cellar.”

On the right-hand window, Paige saw what she’d seen over Tru’s shoulder the previous night in the cellar. Paige shrugged. The fear from the night before crept forward. She swallowed. “Right. Been there. What else?”

“This,” Tru said, pointing to the screen on the left and enlarging it. “This is what you didn’t see.” The screen swung wildly about the room. “See, I just pulled it out and I’m putting it on the shelf. But look at this.” Tru hit pause. He used the mouse to clarify the rather fuzzy picture of something on the floor. “There. What do you see?”

Dexx leaned in, squinting his eyes. “What the hell is that?”

Paige’s breath caught in her chest as she stared at what had been scratched on the dirt floor. “A binding symbol.”

“It was a trap,” Dexx said. “Someone knew we were going to be there. Who knew?”

Paige shook her head. “Chief White and the owner. There was a cop there.”

“The chief said he got a call from one of his guys, and the last thing he remembered was seeing Mike on the scene.” Dexx tapped a finger on the table.

Tru turned his attention back to the computer. “We got so much footage this trip. It’s unbelievable. Paige, I’m taking you with us every time.”

She snorted.

“Did you get anything else?” Dexx asked.

“Tons.”

“Stuff that’s pertinent?”

Tru shrugged. “Not really.”

“So,” Dexx said, rubbing his eye. “What happened down there?”

Paige licked her lips and glanced at her grandmother. “He tried to possess me, I think. It felt like he was doing more than that, though. It felt like he was trying to push me out.”

“Did the tattoo help?” Dexx asked.

“I’m pretty sure it’s the only thing that stopped him.”

“Good,” Dexx said. “Then, as soon as Nick sends my ink, we’re putting it permanent on your body.”

“Still not sure what I think about tattoos. I don’t know if it will interfere with my gifts.”

“Don’t care. This was close, Pea. Too close.”

She hid her trembling fingers. “Yeah.”

“Hey,” Tru said, pointing at her with a goofy expression on his face. “If you do any kind of possessed thing, give me a heads-up. I need pictures.”

Asshole.

Chapter 20

Dexx decided Paige was good enough on her own with Tru and Alma just down the hall. She agreed wholeheartedly, saying something about not needing a babysitter as a full-grown adult woman.

He had research to do. Research wasn't his favorite, but it was better than… paperwork.

Dexx slid into Jackie's driver's seat and clenched the wheel, grinding his teeth in frustration. Why, why, why would anyone think it smart to wipe a person's memories? And who in nine hells of a world thought walling off a person's gift would help anything, especially one like hers?

The bad guy. That's who.

What was Balnore really up to? Dexx'd never once bought into the whole protector-watcher-demon thing. Really? A demon as a protector? Seriously? What would Buffy have been like if Giles had been a cuddly vampire watcher?

Buffy had had a soft spot for vampires, the good ones and the bad ones. That had better not be going on with Paige.

He eased Jackie into gear, and she sedately rumbled down the road.

He stopped at the stop sign, ready to turn onto the highway running through town. He had too many questions, and they were all good ones. Who was this ghost? Where had she come from? What did Lucius want? How did the killer even know about Lucius?

He scanned the friendly streets. Few people populated the sidewalks. Cars were parked all along the storefronts and people meandered around inside the stores. Jackie purred beneath him as he searched for a sign that would lead him to the library.

The wind lifted the tree branches, allowing the sunlight to strike a

little green sign attached to one of the silver light poles along the street. Dexx narrowed his gaze to read the white letters in the fading shade of the noontime sun. Perfect.

The library wasn't very big. A little white square of a building, but the landscaping took the edge off the stark feel of it. The trees were full, and a little garden welcomed visitors with cheery color.

"Jackie, if I don't make it back here in thirty minutes, come get me." Not that she would. She was in a car. Not a demon-special car. Not a talking car. Just a car. Normal felt great in that moment. He patted her dash pad and opened the door.

Time to find some information.

A tall woman with straggly brown hair greeted him. Her overly large eyes gave her an owl-like appearance. She tugged on her purple paisley shirt and gave him what he could only describe as a homely smile. "How can I help you?" The words rolled out on the wave of a sweet, Southern accent.

Homely or not, she was clearly a woman. Women were lovely in every shape, color, and size. Well, unless they were evil and trying to tear people to shreds. Then, not so much. He leaned against the counter, his green T-shirt shifting across his hard abs.

Her blue eyes lit up with surprise and happiness as she leaned in.

He enjoyed making women feel special. It was sad that it took so little. He read her white name tag, beaming his charming smile. "Good afternoon, Shelley."

She blushed and put a hand to her hair. "Hi."

He shook his head to tell her to stop doubting herself and gave her his full and complete attention.

Her hand sagged to the counter, and she gave him a tired smile.

Time to take that right off. "I'm on a ghost hunt."

Her eyes lit up. "Oh."

Perfect. “I’m looking for a story that might have been printed in the local paper about a girl who died around here.”

“Oh, how dreadful.” Compassion filled her eyes.

He loved a woman with compassion. A rare thing these days. “I’m doing some research—”

“On which one?”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “Which one, what?”

“Which plantation are you researchin’, silly?” Shelley opened her big blue eyes, ducking her head with a shy schoolgirl smile. “I mean, we got a lot o’ ghost hunters who come through here lookin’ for evidence of people who died an’ what not.”

“The Metley Plantation.”

“Oh, well, we have all kinds of stories about that place.” She bustled around the end of the counter, leading the way to one of the six public computers. “That one’s just cursed. I swear, there was one time I went up there—just curious, you understand—and I swear I felt a cold hand pass down my back.” Her breath caught in her throat as she blinked back tears.

Women. Such passionate creatures. He wondered if Paige could be that passionate about anything other than work and her daughter.

“And I heard a voice.”

Oh, people hearing voices in a creaky house. The human brain. Such a remarkable thing. “How long ago was this?”

“Well, now, it would have been right after Ashley was murdered.” She gripped the back of an orange, barely cushioned chair. “I just can’t believe this could happen in our town. Everyone here’s so nice.”

“Did you know her? Ashley?”

Shelley shrugged. “I—I went to school with her.”

Was that shame curling her lip, or something else? “You weren’t friends, I take it.”

She shook her head.

Dexx turned to the computer, collecting the information about Ashley's character Shelley had just given him. "Tell me all your records are SC"—he gestured to the computer—"and not HC." He flicked his hand to the stack of books on the rolling shelf tucked beside her.

She giggled. "I am going to have to remember that. Soft copy. Hard copy. Yes. Well, except for some of the really old ones. I'm still workin' on those."

"Just point me in the right direction."

An hour and a half later, he came up with the same "ghost stories" Leslie'd found the last time. The newspaper hadn't printed stories about any murders except for one. It wasn't even worth the trip to the courthouse to look at those records. Nothing new had happened.

So, if this ghost hadn't died in the area, where had she died? And who was she?

Google was man's new best friend. Dogs didn't fetch nearly as well, as far, or as accurately. Hell, he could do this search on his phone, a thing he kept forgetting. He typed in the ghost's name. Jessica Camley.

Shelley came back and peered over his shoulder. "Looks like you found somethin'."

"Looks like I might have," he murmured.

"Who's Jessica Camley? We don't have any Camleys 'round here."

He scanned through the first story. "We caught an EVP. It definitely sounded like she said her name was Jessica Camley." He found a picture of her.

"Oh dear. She's just a little girl."

Jessica had been nine years old with long, straight brown hair. The picture showed her as a solemn girl, and from the look in her eyes, she hadn't smiled much since birth.

"Oh, that's just horrible, her parents dying all of a sudden-like and

all."

That wasn't the worst part, though. Her parents had died suddenly at home within a week of one another. Her mother had slipped in the bathtub. Her father, apparently, had killed himself by exhaust fumes.

A news article filled in most of the information. She'd been bounced around from one foster home to another with claims of pet mutilation. Jessica Camley had died suddenly. A fellow foster kid had accidentally shot her with a gun they'd found in connection with several unsolved murders.

All of this had happened in California, far from Louisiana.

Shelley sat back in a lime-green chair she'd brought over. "Well now, that just don't make any sense. You're sure this little girl said she was Jessica Camley?"

Dexx nodded, his lips twisted in thought. He crossed one arm over his chest and tapped the end of his nose with a finger. What was it that the girl said? I won't go back? Back to where? Had she been trapped somewhere else, in her own little time warp?

He stood up, offering Shelley his hand. "Thanks for all your help. If you think of anything or see anything suspicious, would you call me?"

Her eager expression dipped into one of a shy girl. "You're stayin' with Fanny?"

"Yeah, but here's my cell, if you think of anything."

"I'll call," she all but whispered.

Dexx walked out to his car, his mind scrambling through the information. He glared at Jackie as he approached her. "I was in there longer than thirty minutes. Where were you?"

Jackie remained silent.

"Ignoring me." He opened her long, heavy door and slid in. "I see how you are." He turned the key in the ignition.

No gasp. No rumble. No purr.

He stared at Jackie's steering wheel. "Listen, baby, I didn't mean it. I was joking. I'm sorry. You know how I am."

Nothing.

"Jackie, I'm really, really sorry."

When he turned the key the second time, she roared to life.

For a car with no communication skills, she had a lot more personality than he gave her credit for.

Paige was in trouble. A lot of it, and he needed to figure out just how deep the shit was here in the tiny little hamlet of St. Francisville.

Chapter 21

Paige paced the space between the bed and the door, from the table to the bathroom. She needed to act. She needed to do something, but what?

This case didn't add up. Why draw her here with murders? What was the point of raising this much power? Enough power to provoke ghosts? Did that even make sense?

A knock sounded on the door. Pulling herself out of her internal conflict, she cracked it open to see her grandmother's wrinkled and worn face peering at her through the slit.

Paige stepped back to let Alma into the room. "Did you get a chance to review the runes I sent you?"

"I did." Alma's voice was raspy, like a smoker's. "Though I don't know why you had me look into them. You've already deduced what they meant, I'm sure."

Paige had, but if there was something deeper here, she wanted the expert to figure it out. She wasn't that expert. "Right, except that when you splice them together, it changes their meaning. Or could."

Alma sank into the comfortable chair with a groan. "Merge them, maybe, but not change them."

"Who is this guy?"

"Let's talk about somethin' else."

Paige sank carefully onto the edge of the bed, her back tweaking with the effort. The expression on her grandmother's face said she was ready for a rather unpleasant conversation. Great. Because she needed to be beaten up a little more. A physical ass-whooping wasn't quite enough. A berating was required. Yay. "I don't want to talk about it, Grandma.

What's done is done."

"Nope. We're not putting the blockers on you again, so we need to get this out in the air."

Oh, thank goodness. She wasn't putting the blockers back on. "What do you want to hear, Grandma? You hid all my memories of my daughter, and you and Balnore locked away my gift, banishing even more of my memories. Like ones where I worked cases similar to this one, only I *solved* them. Since I've been in Denver, I've felt like the worst damned detective the world's ever seen. I couldn't close a case to save my life, because that's what it said on paper."

Alma pursed her wrinkled lips.

Paige tugged her hair free of her tight ponytail, her heart carefully cool. "Leah was just the frosting on the cake. I knew there was a hole in my heart. I just didn't know what or who had left it. Or what was wrong with me."

"Nothing was wrong with you."

"Really?" Paige lowered her jaw, her lips closed as she stared pointedly at the window. The calm folded away like a slow-moving fog and was replaced by a seething, creeping anger. "Nothing. That's it—*nothing?* Then why did you hide me?"

Alma narrowed her cataract-ridden eye. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I scared you so bad you hid me, the parts of me that make me who I *am*, so you'd feel safer at night."

"You were never this levelheaded before. You overreacted every time I tried to talk to you."

"Overreacted." The rage rumbled in her gut. She let out a chuckle to mask it. "So, what are you trying to tell me? I wasn't supposed to grieve for the daughter I lost? What, was I supposed to feel less—move on faster?"

“Not summon a demon to kill your mother?”

Paige bit her bottom lip and grinned through the pain. “That wasn’t right, I get that, but you know what the real kicker was?”

Alma blinked, her nostrils flared.

“I summoned one I knew wouldn’t do it.”

Alma tipped her head to the side. “You knew it wouldn’t do it?”

Paige shrugged. “I didn’t even realize it until just now. I summoned Balnore, knowing he’d understand, that he’d help in any way I *needed* him to. But a part of me knew he’d never go through with what I *wanted* him to do.”

Confusion settled across Alma’s features.

“Yeah.” Paige stood, pushing against her leg with the heel of her hand to get her back to fully straighten. She didn’t want to get too close. She didn’t know what she’d do, rationality barely a thought in her rage-clouded mind. “I don’t want to hear how scared you were. I was in pain and I handled it. No one, and I do mean no one, was hurt. Except me. Watching my entire family, everyone I loved, everyone I trusted turn on me? Yeah. And you know what’s weird?”

Alma didn’t move.

“In that time, I wondered why I had trust issues, why I never let anyone in. Now I know. A part of me never forgot that. So, yes, I’m hurting, not that I think you really care, and yes, I’m pissed, but I’m able to deal. I know what my gift means. I comprehend its full impact on humanity, which is something you don’t because you never fucking bothered to fucking ask me about it. And no, I don’t need you if all you’re going to do is judge me. Now, then, do you have anything else you can add to the case?”

Alma ran her gnarled fingertips along the tabletop, her gaze following the movement. “You never talked about your gift.”

“Because I could see the fear in your eyes every time I mentioned it.

The lack of faith in me cut me like a dull, rusty blade every single time. Well, thank you for your love and belief in me. The one thing I discovered is that I'm better off without you."

"Paige."

"No. If you have information that could help, or if you have a way to find the real killer, let me know. But if you want to do the family thing…" Paige shook her head.

"I raised you."

"That's not counting in your favor right now, Grandma."

Alma ran her hand over her head, her shoulders slumping. "I'm sorry, Peanut."

The emotions in Paige's chest went dangerously quiet. "I'll let you know when that's enough."

A key jiggled in the door.

Her hand dropping to her empty side, Paige faced the door. She'd left her gun in the drawer of the table beside the bed. Fire settled into her hand, ready.

Dexx stepped into the room, stashing the key in his jacket pocket. "I'm back. Miss me?" He jerked to a stop at the sight of Alma.

The magick dissipated, but reluctantly. Once stirred, fire wanted to act.

Not knowing what else to do or say, Paige focused on the job. Always fall back on the job. "Tell me you discovered something about the ghost."

Dexx shed his over-shirt, tossing it to the bed.

The sleeve clipped her head. "Hey!"

He smiled angelically. "Yeah, she died in California with no connection to anywhere close."

He bubbled with too much excitement for him to come up empty. "So, what's the connection?"

“Hell.” He grinned, propping himself against the bureau. “Probably the key and the gate.”

Paige closed her eyes. “Whatever they were doing, *somebody* managed to crack open Hell’s gate.”

“At least a little. That little bitch of a ghost got through, so what else did?”

“Son of a—” Paige bit off the rest of her curse and bit her lip. “This is bad. We’ve got to get that key back before they try it again. Chief White hasn’t returned my phone calls.”

“I saw him in town today.” Dexx yawned, tucking his chin to his chest. “He’s calling in the police officers from a local town. He says he has tails on Mike and Malika, people he trusts.”

It was so weird to hear colleagues called by their first names. It took her a second to remember Lieutenant Jones was “Mike.”

“He’s hopeful we’ll find something.”

“Good.” Paige rose from the bed. “We need to do—”

Someone knocked on the door.

Dexx frowned. “You expecting anyone?”

She shook her head.

“It’s probably just Tru,” Alma said, dragging herself out of the chair. “He said he’d come get me if he found anythin’ else on his evidence.”

Paige’s senses were heightened and with reason. Someone in this town was targeting her. As Alma reached for the door, Paige went for her gun just to be safe.

“Not so fast, Detective,” Jones said in a gruff tone.

Her hand on the handle of the drawer, Paige stilled.

“Bring it back, nice and easy.” Jones maneuvered through the door, pushing Alma out of his way.

Dexx rose from the dresser and inched toward the door, just out of Jones’s sight.

“I know you’re here, hunter.” Jones closed the door with his foot.

Dexx launched himself at the man.

“Grandma, get down!” Paige dove for the floor.

Dexx kicked Jones’s knees in. They toppled.

Paige opened the drawer and pulled out her gun.

A shot ricocheted through the room.

She spun, her eyes searching both men.

A bloody hand on his gut, Dexx rolled onto his back.

Alma inched toward him on all fours.

Paige took a step toward Dexx, her gun pointed at Jones. She thumbed the safety off. “Grandma, I need you to call 911.”

The older woman fumbled with the pocket of her blouse.

“No.” Jones rose to his feet, the gun pointed at Dexx in one bloody hand. His lips twisted in a sickly smile. “No. You’re going to put your gun down and you’re going to come with us.”

“You put your gun down.”

A full grin exploded on his face. “You’re not going to shoot me.”

“I’m not?”

“No. You know why? Because you’re good and that’s what good people do.”

Maybe before. She dropped her aim to his knee. “You just shot my friend.”

“Your lover, you mean?”

“He’s not my lover yet.”

Jones’s eye ticked. “Fine.” He turned the gun on Alma. “Shoot me in the knee and see how quickly I pull the trigger on your dear sweet grandmother.”

The reality was this: sure, she could take out his kneecap. It felt like the thing to do, but his finger would twitch in reaction and that gun would go off. Alma was too close to the end of the barrel for him to

miss. She was angry beyond easy measure at her grandmother, but Paige still loved her.

Paige clicked the safety on and tossed her pistol to the bed.

“There’s a good girl. Now, come along with us.”

Paige growled low in her throat. “Bal—”

Jones closed the space between them faster than humanly possible and slammed the butt of his gun against her temple. “I don’t think so.”

His words faded with the light.

Chapter 22

Paige jerked awake. Dexx! Her arms and legs refused to budge. She blinked, trying to make her eyes focus. Ropes.

Something sharp stabbed her arm. The pain focused her eyes. Lieutenant Jones removed a syringe from her.

She tried to get up, but her sluggish mind said no. This was no time to be sluggish. She needed her mind in full working order. “What’s that?”

The only light came from a bare bulb on a string directly above her. It swayed slightly, causing the shadows to stir.

“Something to help you relax.” He dropped the syringe on a table behind him. “Don’t worry. You should feel it soon.”

The windowless room had rough earthen walls. Great. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere safe.” Something clanked above her head, metal on metal. “Relax. Everything will be fine in a few minutes.”

She doubted that. “What are you doing? Are you really prepared to kill me, too?”

“You’re really not that good a detective, are you?”

This definitely wasn’t one of her shinier moments. “You won’t get him to possess me, is what I’m saying.”

“He will, and if he doesn’t then, yes, I will kill you. The end more than makes up for the means. The price—” The tone of his voice rose in pitch. “So small when compared to what’s coming.”

She had to figure out a way out of there, but her mind was drifting further and further away from her. She shook her head to clear it. “It’s not gonna work.” Her words slurred together. It felt like she’d downed a half-bottle of rum.

“You’re going to let him in because you can’t help yourself. You should have let him in the other night, but you fought back. You shouldn’t do that. We need him.”

“So u ca o-en the ate? Yer insa-ne.”

He chortled. “Oh, yes, you’re nearly ready now. Not as insane as some would have you believe, my dear.” He stroked her hair back as he peered into her eyes.

“Is nuffin.” Her eyes closed in what was supposed to be a blink, and would have been, had she been able to reopen her eyes. She just had to open her eyes. Open… the room around warbled in her ears.

His voice was right at her ear. “I want the power, Detective.” The warbling quieted, the sound of his shuffling feet receded. “I want the knowledge hidden behind that gate. I need it for… reasons. All of it is very complicated and beyond your understanding.” He leaned against the wall just inside her line of sight and cocked a foot against the earth wall behind him, crossing his arms over his chest.

He was so gummy and fluid and…stretchy. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I know what’s out there. Home. I need to be where I belong. My people, my… place.”

“You tol’ Malika…” Her thought drifted off. Paige opened her eyes, fighting to focus. “The key. You tol’ her abou’ the key?”

“Yes.”

She fingered the knots binding her wrists. Her fingers felt like they were made of rubber, like all the bones suddenly turned to jelly. She had to get out of there. “You started this? You? Nah. Ser-is?”

“Yes.” A smug smile slithered across his warped face. “I was put here for a reason, Detective Whiskey. I know that. I was meant to show this meager race what true freedom really is.”

“People—” She fought to breathe. Something heavy had settled on her

chest. Something she couldn't see. Guilt? Fear? The demon set on pushing her out of her body? "People aren' ready fer tha'."

"That's the point. This nation—this *world*—is a litigious, blame-everyone-else kind of place. No one knows how to handle true freedom, or the responsibility that comes with it. I'm here to watch you writhe with the magnitude of knowledge buried behind that gate. The other one is impossible to crack, but this? Oh, yes." His eyes glowed.

Paige pushed as far away from him as the ropes allowed, the glow getting brighter and brighter, the flames dancing further from his eyes.

"I want to hear your screams as you go insane after getting exactly what you wanted. Father would be proud."

She had to keep her cool. The drug. There was a drug in her system, making her see things. "Father? Sat'n?"

She imagined a box for the drug to go, then imagined the rest of her body sorting the good from the bad.

"You stupid girl." Disgust dripped from his posture, the flames dancing in his eyes. "I'm here to make everyone pay."

"Fer wha'?"

"Not believing. For not obeying the rules. I'll set you free. I'm a son of God."

"You bringin' Armageddon?" That was almost clear. Whatever she was doing to compartmentalize her mind, it was working.

"I'm here to bring about peace, to bring the human race to their knees. When I came here, I started out to punish your pathetic race. Bring peace. Bring war. Oh, I'll do that, then I'll take the reins of power as your savior. Before the end, you'll *all* beg me to be your king. Your *god*."

"You're insane." Her speech cleared, not completely, but enough not to sound half-asleep.

"You'll see."

“Why open the gate?” Her fingers worked the ropes, feeling less like jelly and more like fingers. “Why depend on a demon? Wouldn’t you be able to open it if you’re His son? Why send you down here to open the gate without giving you the power to do so?” Her head still felt packed full of wool, but thoughts got through the mess. The fringes warbled uncomfortably, though.

The serenity that had blanketed his face disappeared. He pushed off the wall and stormed toward her.

Pain exploded across her cheek where his hand connected with it. She blinked, moving her mouth to massage the pain away. He hadn’t held anything back in that swing. Her heart raced. She took in a few deep breaths to steady herself but was unable to slow her heart’s pelting pace. “Must be a sore subject.”

“Like you and your apparent lack of gifts,” Jones sneered. “Your entire family is rife with them, while you’re sitting in back as the outcast.”

“I don’t have that problem anymore and you know it, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

His smug smile slid back into place. “I do, don’t I? Imagine, someone with a gift as powerful and rich as yours, so caught up in other things you never saw any of this coming.”

“How’d you find out about me?”

“I saw you in Texas. I wanted to get closer to that case you were working, wanted to know if he was trying to raise my demon, to open my gate.” He shook his head, dismissing the subject. “He wasn’t. He was too weak. Feel okay?”

“Peachy,” she gritted out, her fingers loosening the knot. “How did you know?”

“You slipped,” he said, cockiness rolling from him. “I saw you in an alley. You conjured a demon. Talked to him. No complex ritual, no

circle, nothing. Can you imagine how wonderful you are for my cause?"

Paige lost control of her breathing, too shallow and too fast. Dizziness hit her. Her fingers shook on the knots. She couldn't slow her heart rate. Her skin flushed with heat. The effects of the drug had been receding. Hadn't they? "What did you give me?"

"The fancy name is *Psilocybe cubensis* injection." He strolled over to her. "You would know it as magic mushrooms. Malika, she's almost ready for you."

Light shined in a large square against the wall at her feet. Paige could see the shadow of a tall, curvaceous woman walking down the steps, with another man following her.

Something crashed. Could have been a cellar door. The room was again bathed in the lone light of the naked light bulb hanging above her. Paige blinked, trying to clear her mind. The smell of lilacs assaulted her nose. When Paige opened her eyes, she found herself lying in a field of the fragrant purple blooms.

"Are you still with us?" Jones asked, his face blotting out the sun.

A breeze blew, fluttering against her skin. Everything was so beautiful.

Paige's stomach heaved. She twisted as far as the ropes would allow and hurled the contents of her stomach. Her right hand was released, allowing her to project most of her vomit onto the floor.

Done, she lay on her side and panted, the room spinning. Magic mushrooms, huh? She couldn't say she liked them.

"Lovely." He pushed her back onto the table and retied her hand. "She's ready."

"She's bugged out of her fuckin' mind," another man said as he came into view.

Paige stared at him, transfixed. He was such a beautiful man to look at, with his blond hair cropped short and spiked on top of his head. His

brilliant blue eyes swam like twin glistening pools above her.

He shook his head in disgust. “How much di’ ye give her?”

“Not much,” Jones said, his voice very far away.

Paige returned her attention to the sun, relaxing into the soft earth beneath her with a dreamy sigh.

“Well,” said a woman with a silky-smooth voice, “at least she won’t fight us.”

“Bu’ we need her competent enough to concentrate on lettin’ him in.”

“She’ll do fine,” Jones said, his voice clipped. “She was born for this moment.”

Paige giggled, enjoying the warmth of the light and the sound of the surrounding voices. “Born for this,” she repeated, her words slurred. “Yes, I was born for this, this moment, this right now. Yes.”

“Bloody hell. Let’s just get on with it.”

Chapter 23

The drugs in Paige's system had her head swirling. Her vision went strange with things she knew couldn't be real.

"You'll be a good girl, right, Paige?" Jones asked.

"I'm a good girl, I am." Paige giggled again, her heart beating like the frantic fluttering of a trapped butterfly. "I heard that in a movie once. What movie was that?"

"I'm sure I don't know, or really care," Malika said, stepping into view.

"You're so…so pretty." Paige smiled, her head rocking with the motion of the world around her. "Everything's so pretty."

"That's good, dear." Malika raised her face to the light. "Sven, it's time to start the ceremony."

"Is someone getting married?" Paige blinked slowly, the fingers of her right hand twitching. "I hate weddings."

"Knife," Malika said, her voice clipped.

Jones reached over to Paige, handing Malika a curved, dangerous-looking blade.

Fear wiped the feeling of blissfulness out of Paige's heart like a sledgehammer. Her eyes opened wide. She attempted to back away, only to find herself still strapped to the table. "What are you doing?" One moment of pure clarity overtook her mind. She remembered who she was, what she was doing strapped to a table, and what that knife meant.

The moment faded.

The knife drew closer. The people around her, the flowers, the sun, everything slipped into a pit of dizzying darkness. She lifted herself onto

her elbows as much as the ropes allowed, inching farther from the blade.

Harsh hands grasped her shoulders, pinning her to the slab. A grotesque face emerged from the void, his eyes black, his nose slit down the middle, his forehead red and creased. His blond hair stood in blood-tipped spikes on top of his head. He sneered and said something she did not understand.

She screamed with every ounce of energy she had left, pulling against her bonds.

The others talked to her in nonsense words, her mind filled with fright. Another demon stepped from the inky blackness, his eyes shooting red flares of light. His long, clawed hands ripped at her shirt.

She gulped air and kept screaming, looking from one demon to the next. The knife settled on her chest. The woman chanted above her. She felt the magick coalesce, forming a nebulous swirling cloud around her.

The second demon pinned her down.

Unable to move, unable to breathe, the heat of her tears slid down her face and into her ear, amplifying the surrounding sounds. Her screams turned to whimpers as she lost the ability to gain enough air. The dark world spun. Everything crowded around her. The blond demon's hand bit into the flesh of her arm.

The world stilled. Time stopped. The knife quivered where it lay against her breast. Paige stared into Malika's brown eyes and found peace in the maelstrom.

Malika's face twisted into a cruel sneer. Time rushed forward, and the vision shattered with an explosion of dust and the tinkling of glass. Paige pushed off of the slab beneath her, driving the knife into her skin. The pain sent her skidding back into the hellish nightmare around her. Hot blood slipped from her frozen body.

She shivered on the slab, helpless, unable to move, unable to stop

what these monsters were doing. Terrified. She couldn't figure a way out. She couldn't think of a way to stop them.

A light grew from the size of a firefly to a blazing door. A calm blanketed her as she watched it approach. A face unraveled from the light's grace, a chiseled and handsome face accentuated with an intense network of tattoos.

The pain disappeared, pushed into the dark recesses of the nightmare. Malika's voice seemed far away. Paige floated up, past the claws tearing at her and the rough ropes that held her down.

His body drifted towards hers, draped in an exquisite robe of burgundy velvet. The intricate embroidery of blues, greens, and gold along the edge drew her attention to the robe opening, to the rippled expanse of muscled manliness. Tight black leather pants were buttoned securely at his waist. A trail of soft black hair-like fur stopped like a rivulet of water pooling at the base of a mountain.

"Paige," he crooned, his accent giving her name an exotic ring. "Come to me."

"I know you," she whispered. "You're dangerous. A ghost. A demon ghost."

"You know me." The deep rumble of his voice caused her to shiver. "As I know you. Now, come to me."

She closed her eyes. Fire licked at her in a way it hadn't in three long years. She felt alive, empowered. Impassioned. "No."

His strong arms wrapped around her, holding her close, one arm draped around her waist, the other holding her head cushioned against his chest. He smelled of wood and something else she couldn't place.

Safe. She belonged here, as she belonged nowhere else. Accepted, not feared, not manipulated.

"You must trust me now. I will rule this body, let you out when I am tired. Do you understand?" He pulled her head back to capture her gaze.

She couldn't tear her gaze away from his, trapped and helpless in the depths of his soul.

"Help your world. I own your life. Forfeit, be my servant. Be my instrument so I can stop the madness, the killings. Your pain."

"You can stop them?"

"I can," he said gently. "But not without your help. Will you serve me?"

No, came a voice from somewhere inside her mind.

She fell into his bottomless black eyes. "No," she breathed softly. Every cell in her body cried out against her. "I will not help you."

He smiled at her and cupped the back of her head, drawing his lips towards hers. "No, love, that's not the right answer."

She watched his lips tread dangerously, wonderfully near. She needed to feel what it meant to be a woman again, to feel alive and emboldened. Her mind scrambled away as her body quivered to be nearer.

His breath feathered across her lips. "Mistake, love."

She took the breath he offered, closing her eyes as her body answered him.

His lips brushed her cheek. "Paige." He groaned, his tongue encircling her earlobe in wet heat. "How long have I waited for you? How long have I yearned to feel this? The magick out there has already sold you to me. I *am* your owner, you *will* submit."

She clung to him. Her head fell back into the comforting support of his hands. Her body was his, powerless to stop him. She had no wish to her mind frantically sought a way out. Her mind called to the elements, but they were blocked off, unresponsive. Not again!

His lips trailed down her neck, leaving a path of burning passion in its wake as she moaned, wordlessly begging for more.

He pulled back.

She opened her eyes, looking at him askance.

A soft smile softened his features. “Now you will help me?”

Her body pressed against his. Her mind screamed. “Demon, leave me.”

“Open to me,” he commanded. “Do not fight me. Let me in.”

She swallowed, watching his frustrating descent. Her hand ran over his shaved head. “I’ll fight you.” She claimed his lips with the power of her passion.

His lips were firm, at once gentle, yet demanding. She closed her eyes, pushing herself closer to him, needing more of him than one small kiss. She needed the feel of his hands on her body, to feel his skin against hers. She needed him.

He teased her mouth open. His tongue invaded, sending streams of energy coursing through her. She devoured him, taking as much as he would give her. She moaned, exhilarating in the feel of his hard, muscled body pressed tight to her own.

He wrapped his arms around her. Squeezing her tightly, he deepened the kiss still further.

Then something changed. The magick cloud around them suddenly shot forward, searing them both where they touched. She felt her skin turn inside out as his did the same. The both of them were flayed and opening to the other.

He wasn’t just pressing his body against hers. His body was entering hers. His mouth morphed into her own. His arms blended into her back. His torso sank into her chest.

She tried to pull back, to disengage. They had become one like a half-formed conjoined twin. She tried to raise her hands, but her arms clung to his neck, refusing to budge. She blinked, seeing only his eyes, those huge, deep pits of darkness. What was happening?

Do not fight me, love, she heard his voice say inside her mind. *You will be my vessel. I will fight these demons no matter how they called me. You are*

mine, and I must protect the key. You *will protect the key.*

Demons. Her heart raced as she suddenly recalled the full gravity of her situation.

Lucius.

This was Lucius, a demon trying to possess her body to open the Gate to Hell. Rising fury gave her the strength to push back. She gained the freedom of one hand.

You will be my vessel.

No. A firm sense of reality slammed into her. *I will not.*

You leave me no choice, he said softly, pausing in his assault to overwhelm her body. *I am sorry.*

Chapter 24

Paige only had a moment to wonder what he meant. In the back of her mind, a door opened with a sickening crack. Emotions and memories that had been forgotten even with the wards removed, flooded through her mind.

Leah.

She sat in the rocking chair outside her room at Grandma Alma's house. The house was dark. Paige's eyes were heavy with exhaustion as she held her daughter in her arms, rocking her, singing her back to sleep.

"Dancing bears, painted wings. Things I almost remembered. And a song someone sings. Once upon a December."

She kissed her daughter's fuzzy, warm head. The little girl's bright blue eyes were so close to shutting. "I love you," she whispered before continuing the song.

The memory shifted.

Paige returned home. Leslie met her at the door, arms full of baby, Amanda on one arm, Leah in the other. "Here, take Lee. She needs changed. I'm making dinner, and how was your day?"

"Okay, I guess." Paige smiled at Leah, who giggled in her arms. "And how was your day? Huh? Were you a good girl today? Momma missed you." She hugged her daughter tightly to her. "Momma missed you a lot."

"Momma." Leah wrapped her chubby hand in Paige's hair and tugged.

"Leslie," she called, rushing to the kitchen. "Did you hear that? Lee just called me Momma."

Leslie beamed, Amanda balanced on her hip as she stood at the sink,

rinsing off a spoon. “Oh, what a smarty.” She shut off the water and turned to the stove, Amanda as far from the hot burner as Leslie’s body would allow. “Mandy still hasn’t said one word, but I can tell she’s close. She has so much to say, I can feel it.”

Paige tossed her daughter in the air, peals of giggles settling in and over her. “You’re such a smart girl, Lee. I’m so proud of you.”

Pain lanced her heart, choking her. She struggled to the surface of her mind, concentrating on the demon in front of her. She collapsed to the ground.

You made me do this, love, Lucius said softly. *I gave you a chance. Now you’ll feel real pain.*

She fought the overwhelming sorrow shredding her heart, crippling her, tearing her down.

He was still for a long moment. *I am sorry you made me do this.*

The next memory hit her hard.

She stared at a judge, fear ripping through her, her hands trembling.

The woman in the black robe sat in her chair on the high platform. “Ms. Whiskey, I cannot in good conscience allow you to keep your daughter. The allegations that your mother has brought to the court seem justified. The evidence shows that you could bring great danger to the development of your daughter. You have to think about her. Do you honestly think this is the way to raise a child?”

“I don’t practice magick, Your Honor,” Paige cried out. “I am not a witch.”

“That is not the issue.” The judge picked up a piece of paper.

Paige didn’t know exactly which paper the judge held in her hands. She only knew it was covered in half-truths. Damning half-truths. She wasn’t a bad mother. She wasn’t.

“This?” Incredulity exploded on her face. “I don’t want to do this, Ms. Whiskey. I don’t feel it is right to take a child away from her mother,

but in this case?"

Then don't, Paige cried inside her mind.

The judge sat up straighter and gestured to the other side of the room. "I side with the plaintiff in this matter. Leah Marie Whiskey will live with her grandmother, Mrs. Rachel Whiskey. Request to move out of state has been granted."

"No."

The old pain flooded through her, squeezing the air from her chest.

Yes. Lucius took final control of Paige's body.

Paige didn't feel anything. She was trapped in a drug-induced hell, unable to escape. *I have to stay in control. I can stop this. I can stop them from killing anyone else and from opening the gate, and I can go home.*

I need you to concentrate. This is your fear. This is what you must face. Your daughter is gone.

I know all that.

You cannot see her.

His words were a knife to the gut.

You cannot be with her.

The knife twisted.

You cannot watch her grow, listen to her voice, look into her eyes, bandage her hurts.

The words like knives lodged behind her breastbone.

This, you must face on your own. The time of hiding is behind you.

I won't let you win.

"Demon," Malika's voice resounded clearly in Paige's ears. "I feel you. Have you succeeded?"

"I have," Paige heard her voice say.

She tried to clench her hand into a fist. She could feel what her mind remembered the sensation to be, but her eyes only saw the twitching of her fingers. Visually, everything was distant, disconnected as though she

were there, yet not there. She tried again. This time, her fingers remained perfectly still.

Do not fight me, Lucius warned. *I do not have to keep you in here. I can throw you out and keep the body for myself.*

No. She had let the demon in. She had let the demon in. Oh, God. What had she done?

"Open the gate," Malika commanded.

"Unbind me."

"I don't think so," the woman sneered at him.

"Then show me the key."

Paige watched the world through a window. A very small window to a dark and abysmal room.

"Again," Malika said, "I don't think so."

Lucius, what's going on?

Malika began singing, swaying in place. Paige could see the magick as the other woman spun in a haze of reds and oranges. She felt the spell's intention even though she did not understand what the woman said. *Compulsion. It's a compulsion spell. She'll trap you and you'll be forced to do whatever she says.*

Paige heard a roar. The voice was hers, but wholly unearthly with its multiple tones. She watched through the windows of her eyes in amazement as Lucius broke through the rope one arm at a time. He swung her fists, connecting with Sven and Mike, sending both men tumbling against the walls.

The stairs. They're behind us.

She heard herself groan. Her fingers fumbled with the knots around her ankles.

Just break the damn rope.

Malika's spell grew more intense, more furious and desperate. *Paige, I cannot—she's*—Suddenly, Paige was thrown to the forefront of her own

mind and body. She had control. Her fingers. Not his. She shoved the last knot away, her body twitching, her heart racing, her breathing out of control. She blinked, her mind still muddied with the remnants of the hallucinogen that coursed through her blood. She fell from the table and stumbled toward the exit.

"Stop," Malika commanded.

Paige tripped up the stairs, forcing her to use all four limbs to make it to the top. She shoved the cellar doors open. Cool air rushed her. Solid dirt welcomed her back, the grass tickling her arms in greeting. Birds called out to her. The night sky beckoned.

"I command you to stop, demon."

Lucius clawed his way to the front, ripping, pulling her out of her limbs.

"No!" Paige maintaining control. "This body is mine."

I warned you!

She gained her feet and ran with energy she didn't have. The moon was weak in its crescent stage of death. The tall, sick trees rose from the ground, leering and snarling at her, reaching for her as she ran. Sobs choked her. She forged on, pushing away the pains of her body, the snags as the limbs scratched her already over-sensitive skin. She had to get away.

"Paige," someone cried ahead of her.

Blinding light seared her eyes, shooting a stabbing pain through her skull. Lucius recoiled inside her.

"Demon," Malika shouted behind her. "I command you to stop."

"Paige," a new voice said.

She jerked away, half seeing the new person in the bright glare of headlights. The world swirled, tossing her about. Who? Friend or foe? Friend or foe? His hands came toward her again, but she slapped them away, growling.

“Paige,” he said again. “It’s Chief White.”

“Chief?” Help? A way out? An escape? “Brian?”

“Yes.”

“Demon,” Malika commanded.

“Go.” Paige sobbed from the pain, the emotional hurt, the confusion, the relief. She pushed at White. “Go.”

“Who’s attacking you?”

“Witch. Demon. Go.”

He opened the car door and shoved her into the back seat. She lay in a huddled lump as he tore out of the gravel driveway, away from Malika, away from Mike and Sven, and the horrible dreams.

But not away from Lucius.

No. She had let him in.

She had let him in. God help her. She had let him in.

Chapter 25

Lucius rampaged through her mind.

Chief White glanced over his shoulder for a brief moment before returning his eyes to the road. “That’s a lot of blood. Are you all right?”

Lucius’s will slammed into Paige, making her head pound. He threw memories at her, forcing her to eat her own emotions. She lost resolve with each blow. It would be so easy to just…slip…to let him take control again.

She straightened slightly. Those memories made her weak, giving the demon something to exploit. She had to stay strong. She couldn’t let him win.

She concentrated on the arm of the door digging into her side.

Ground.

She felt the leather seat under her hand, the odd groaning sound it made under the gentle massage of her drumming fingers.

Center.

The cool of the window on her cheek.

Ground.

The streetlights passing by.

Center.

The man in the driver’s seat, a police chief, someone safe, someone who offered protection.

Paige, Lucius called, his accent putting a lilt to her name. *Give me control.*

No. She covered her ears with her hands. Ground and center. Maintain control.

I’ll let you have your body back, love. But I need to stop her now. She has

the key. I felt it.

And she'll use you to open the gate. Paige rolled onto her back, one foot propped against the door. *I felt that, too. You were going to let her do whatever she wanted.*

No. I wouldn't have allowed it.

How do I know for sure? You stole my body.

"Hey, Doc," White said. "I need you to meet me at the station. Bring your emergency kit."

How do I know you're not really just using me to unleash hell on Earth?

"I'm bringing in Detective Whiskey. She has cuts and abrasions—Yeah. Again. I know. It's worse this time. I don't know how bad, but I think she's been drugged."

You don't, Lucius said. *But I am not the bad guy here. I assure you. I must be in control.*

"I know. I know. I'll be there in five minutes. How's Mr. Colt? He okay?"

You were going to let them use you to open the gate. You had to have known.

I knew they'd try. The power in Lucius's voice smothered her weakened will. *I misjudged their strength. That will not happen again.*

"Good. Okay. Bring him with you."

You must believe me, Paige. Please. I am trying to stop them.

Right. Believe him after what he did to her? To gain control of her body? *You tricked me.*

You left me no choice. I left your mind intact. When I leave, you will continue to be you.

"We'll get you help, Paige." Chief White peered over his shoulder again. The whites of his eyes seemed to glow in the darkness. "Okay? Just hold on."

She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold on. If the world had

any justice, she'd be allowed a moment of weakness, a second to close her eyes and regroup. Not now. *You need my body.*

Yes, love. I do. I cannot stop them bodiless. I have no power without one.

You were a human. You were born. You're not a demon, so how?

I was human, Paige. His voice was like a soft, comforting blanket. The barrage of memories ceased.

You're a demon now?

Yes.

Better if you weren't a misogynist. We could work together.

No.

Yes.

Reality slipped, then righted itself. Was it the drug? Or something else?

"Paige," the chief called, "what drug did they give you?"

She was just so tired. She wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and go to sleep. Sleep. Good…God. Sleep.

"Paige!"

You've gotta release, love.

She couldn't. She'd already let the damned thing possess her. She couldn't allow him to regain control, too.

Lucius rammed himself into her.

She heard a rib crack with the force. The lights blurred on either side of her. The shadows slithered into pointed, menacing shapes. Her stomach lurched into her throat. Too much. Too crazy. So much pain. Had to stop. Had…to…stop.

Give me control.

That command ripped through her mind.

"What drug are you on?"

"Shrooms." Her voice was a bare rasp. Ground and center. Damn it. She hugged herself tighter against her shivers.

“Talk to me,” he said, allowing for no other option in his tone. “How are you feeling?”

Paige, Lucius commanded.

She closed her eyes again. “Not good. Hurry! I need Grandma.”

You will release your control.

“No.” Paige gritted her teeth with the effort to hold him back. The muscles in her shoulder blades sent needles of pain coursing down her arms.

“Paige! Talk to me. How are you feeling?”

“Cold.” A violent shudder tore through her body.

Lucius punched with his will.

Her head hit the window.

“What did they do to you in there?”

She sobbed. She was out of strength and out of her league.

“Did they cut you?”

“Yes.”

“Badly?”

The onslaught continued inside her body, inside her soul. She held firm as best she could, not knowing exactly what she was doing.

She closed her eyes, resting for one…second.

Lucius.

Demon.

Her eyes opened, half by her control, half by his. She bit down hard, her jaw aching. She clenched her fingers around her arms, fighting to push him back, to maintain the upper hand.

“How bad are you hurt?”

She couldn’t answer him. Her body bled inside and out. A dizzying maelstrom overtook her mind.

Lucius was stronger.

“Paige.” The chief put the car in park. He twisted in his seat, tossing

his seatbelt out of the way. His hand came towards her.

Paige jerked her body as far away from his hand as she could. “Stay back.”

That voice wasn’t hers. Deeper. Darker. Multi-tonal.

No.

Hysteria rose in her chest. She couldn’t let the demon in. She fought with everything she had.

She bared her teeth, releasing a demonic scream.

Shit.

Paige peered through eyes no longer her own. Her lips twisted into a sneer. Strength infused her body. Her body hurled out of the car and into the man before her.

The chief barely had time to raise his hands in front of him.

Paige watched helplessly as her colleague’s body was tossed across the parking lot to land in the grass in front of the building. *Oh, God. Help me. Please.*

“Back, demon,” Dexx yelled from the yard. He stepped toward her, wearing torn blue jeans and a ragged T-shirt, a wooden cross held out in front of him.

Her body chuckled. Lucius raised her hands in front of them. “You again. I can’t be stopped by a simple cross.”

Her voice, tainted by the demon’s soft accent.

Paige prepared herself for battle, digging deep into the emotions the demon had thrust at her. Maybe they could be used as power against him. She’d get her body back and send him packing.

Dexx advanced on them, his face serious as his other hand fumbled in the duffle bag slung over his shoulder. “*Abeo inimicus*.”

She saw the power gather and release at them, but Lucius wrapped Paige around him like a shield.

She took the brunt of Dexx’s command. It gripped her with a fury she

simply could not fight off, pushing her away, forcing her to leave. Blackness called to her, beckoned, beseeched. When the power behind the command finally dispersed, she settled somewhere in the back of her own mind, exhausted.

The demon smiled. “Well, you’re a helpful sort of lad, aren’t you?”

Dexx glared at them. Not at them. At the demon hunkering inside her. “*Impero cui en apollo Christo*.”

“*Absit*.” Lucius’s will released like a whip. “Your grammar is abominable. Were you telling me to follow the orders of God, or give them to Him? I didn’t follow.”

Dexx winced, raising his eyebrow. “Latin was never my thing, anyway. But I did get your attention, didn’t I?”

“Indeed you did.” Lucius flung Paige’s hands out and shouted, “*Citivolus*.”

Instead of flying through the air as he should have, Dexx staggered a step back. Light burned across the tattoos along his arms, minute fragments of fire peeling off and dispersing into the night. Dexx groaned, hunched over as though his arms were too heavy to lift. The energy crackled as it dissipated, running up and down his arms. Dexx stood with a half-cocked grin on his face. “Grammar’d *that* pretty well, I think.” He shook his hands out, flinging flakes of soot from his arms. “I didn’t get this far because I’m that charming.”

Paige sighed in relief. Or she would have if her lungs were her own. The protective tattoos on Dexx’s arms worked, even in this situation. Amazing. Perhaps she should let him give her some of those. If she ever got her body back. When she got her body back.

Lucius narrowed Paige’s eyes.

“Can Paige hear me?”

She pounded on the bars of her mind, knowing her yells were useless.

“Oh, she can hear you.”

“Good. Then listen.” He brought out a bottle, popped the top off, and flung it at her. “Push.”

The first drop hit them. Lucius screamed.

Dexx fell to his knees, clamping his hands over his ears.

Paige’s knees bent as the demon writhed in pain. Her body crumpled to the ground with a whimper. Her own pathetic whimper.

She wiggled her fingers, her toes, moved her foot.

Ear-numbing silence filled the lawn.

Dexx crawled to her. He grabbed her shoulder. “Paige?”

She blinked her eyes open. “I hurt.”

Chapter 26

Dexx gingerly probed his ears for blood. His fingers came away clean, so he'd probably recover just fine.

Brian hobbled over to Dexx. "Tell me this isn't—" He shook his head.

"Don't know why you'd ask me to lie." Dexx pulled Paige to her feet. Honestly, he had no idea what the captain had been about to say. Tell him this wasn't demons? Leprechauns? Halloween? Crazy? Insane? The man looked like he was about to freak. Dexx had to keep things together for everyone. "This mixture could wear off anytime. We need to get her inside."

"Mixture of what?" Brian asked.

"Holy water, herbs, and a special blend of other things. I don't have much, and it's *real* hard to get more. Hurry." Dexx headed for the front door. He stooped to retrieve his duffle bag on the way by. "Do you have a room without windows, scissors, or anything else this thing might be able to use?"

"Yeah."

A car drove into the parking lot. The car shut off and someone got out.

"Hey, Doc," Brian hailed. "We need ya in here."

"Which way?" Dexx crested the entry, holding Paige's upper arm.

She stumbled and fell against the wall.

"Nope. Come on, Pea. We're almost there."

Brian led the way. "Here." He opened a door and stepped inside.

Dexx entered the room, guiding Paige to a chair. He found an empty box in the hallway, then walked to the desk. With his arm, he pushed all the papers, the inbox, the phone, the stapler, everything except the

monitor, into the box. “Brian, take this and get it out of here. Paige, I need you to keep that thing down. You focus on me and what I’m doing. You got me?”

She closed her eyes and nodded, sinking into the stiff chair.

Dexx dumped the contents of his duffle onto the desk, removing the rope. “I’m really sorry I have to do this, Pea, but I can’t trust that you’ll be able to keep that thing from coming back to the surface again. Okay? I’m helping you. Just remember that. You got a good bead on me?”

Paige nodded. “I don’t know what happened.”

He flipped a rope around her arm, tying her to the chair.

“What are you doing?” Brian blockaded the doorway with his body, keeping the doctor outside.

“Gonna expel this demon. I need to wait for Alma, though. Tru’s bringing her over. And if I’m going to keep her here until then, she can’t move. I can do this, Pea. Really, I can.”

“Why do you need Alma?” Brian kept close to the door, peering out every few seconds.

“All my exorcisms involve the host dying. Alma’s a witch, and a damn strong one. If anyone can help me get the demon out without killing Paige, it’s her.” He hoped. He dug out his rubber band bound papers and thumbed through them until he found the one he was after. Careful not to rip it, he removed it from the bundle and knelt on the floor. Time to trap this demon.

“Water.” Paige leaned her head back, licking dry lips. “I’m so thirsty.”

“She’s coming down.” The doctor disappeared down the hall. “Be right back.”

Dexx had designed this trap using a mash-up of anything he could get his hands on; every culture, every myth, every legend. He traced it out with chalk and laid a circle of salt around it. It worked. He knew it worked. He’d test-driven it way too many times.

“Dexx.” Paige’s red-rimmed eyes sought out his gaze. “I really fucked up, didn’t I?”

He didn’t want to look at her, didn’t want to see her this way, knowing this might be the last time. The last time they talked. The last time they saw each other. She had a demon inside her, and he only knew of one way that ended. Badly, with a side dish of dead. “Yeah, Pea. You kinda did. But we’re gonna laugh about this later. I need you to trust me, and when Alma gets here, I need your help to push. We’re *going to get it out.* Okay?”

“Please do.”

“Is he using your gifts?”

“No.” Her head dipped, then swung back up like a kid fighting a nap. I’m keeping him back for now.

“That’s one point for the home team.” He grinned at her. Hopefully, she saw nothing but confidence. That could make the difference between living and… not living.

“You were shot.”

It still hurt, but only when he thought about it. “Yeah. Nicked some fat. Nothing much. Doesn’t aim well for a serial killer.”

Paige let out a dry chuckle. “Does it hurt?”

“Nah. Barely stings.” So, he lied. Big deal.

“Your water,” the doctor said, coming into the room with a glass.

Dexx stopped him before he got too close. He flicked his gaze meaningfully at the salt circle on the floor. “Don’t break it.”

The doctor glared at him before kneeling in front of Paige. “Is this all necessary?” he asked, helping her drink. She choked, so he set the glass down, opening his bag. He pulled out a pair of blue latex gloves and slipped them on with well-practiced ease. “I think she’ll be fine now. The drug seems to be pretty much out of her system.”

“Yes, it’s necessary,” Dexx said. “And let’s hope to God she’s coming

down. What the hell did they give her?"

"A hallucinogen, I'd wager, from her reaction. I need more water." The doctor gestured at Brian. "In a bowl. And a rag. Can we please untie this woman?"

"No." Dexx's tone left no wiggle room. The man didn't need to know what they were dealing with, but he did need to understand the gravity of their situation. "We cannot. Just do what you have to and get back out of the circle. You smudge one single line and we're going to have a painful talk afterward. Am I being plain enough?"

The older, balding man twisted around toward Dexx. He must have seen something that stopped the words that obviously wanted to come out. He turned back to Paige. He pulled back her torn shirt and fingered the wounds on her chest. "They're not deep. That's good at least."

Dexx swallowed. Symbols. The assholes had carved symbols into her skin. Magickal symbols didn't simply scar the flesh. The magick burned to the bone.

The doctor inspected the wounds on her forearms. "Neither are these."

"Deep enough to scar." To her bone. Dexx saw through the blood drying on Paige's chest, saw the symbol carved directly over her heart. His rising rage froze in absolute terror. Cold bum-rushed him, starting at his scalp and traveling to his feet. "Fuck."

"She'll heal," the doctor reassured.

Dexx stormed across the room, throwing the book on the table. It sailed off and hit the floor. "Shit." He knew that mark. An open door. An open fucking door to the demon world on a demon summoner. Nine hells, she was his damned friend! He punched the wall beside him. "Fuck!"

"Dexx? What's going on?" Paige asked, her voice shaking. "What's wrong? Dexx, answer me, please."

Dexx had to keep cool. They were fucked. The home team was fucking fucked, but he couldn't let Paige see that. He braided his fingers over his head and forced a smile. "Nothing. Just had to work out some nerves. We got this, you and me. I need you to remain calm. Any chink in that steel armor of yours, and your demon friend's going to get out."

She visibly fought to control her fear. "It's bad, isn't it?"

He clenched his jaw. Hard. They had a whole mess of bad. Bad topped with bad. First her gift, and now the symbols? And there was no way of getting rid of those. The bad one covered her chest, her heart chakra, her power. The others? Small riddling her arms, her shoulders. Whoever had masterminded this either didn't think she'd survive this nightmare, or was planning to use her again another time with another demon. He quirked his lips, shoving shields over his expression. "Seen worse."

She watched him for a long moment.

The chief set the bowl of water down on the floor beside the doctor.

"Liar." But something shifted in her expression. Calm resignation.

Fear was a demon's way in, so…yay. Go, team, go.

Fuck.

The doctor dressed her wounds with quick efficiency.

Dexx needed help. He needed a witch who had seen more shit than he'd lived through. He needed someone who understood the arcane, the occult, the angels, and the demons. He needed someone who could scare the pants off the boogeyman. "Where the hell is Alma?"

"Here," the old woman's cantankerous voice called from the front door. "What happened?"

Brian disappeared and came back with Alma and Tru in tow.

"Dear God," she muttered. "Girl, what have you done?"

"Grandma." Tears studded Paige's eyes. "I need you."

"You," Dexx barked, pointing at Paige. "Stay strong. No tears. No fears. Nothing. You stay with me in the here and now. Is that

understood?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing major," the doctor said, putting his bag back together. Dexx helped him over the salt line. "A few cuts. Nothing too deep or spectacular. What a sick bastard."

"If you only knew," Dexx said under his breath.

"If you need anything," the doctor said to Brian on his way out.

"Will do, Doc. Drive safe. Say hi to your wife for me."

The doctor glanced at Paige one last time before leaving. "Yeah."

That left a very silent room filled with people more than a little on edge.

"So, are we going to exorcise this thing, or what?" Alma asked.

Dexx shook his head, biting his lips. "We need help on this one. You, sure, but maybe more. I don't know."

"What do you mean, maybe more?" Her worried gaze settled on Paige.

Dexx stepped into the salt circle and peeled away the bandage on Paige's chest. "This."

"I can't see it." Paige pulled her chin down. "The bandage is in the way."

"It's fine."

"Obviously not. I need to see."

"No, you don't. Remember to think happy thoughts. That's *your* job. Happy thoughts. Got it?" He peeled the bandage up a little more for Alma.

Alma craned her neck to peer over his shoulder without entering the ethereal cage. A startled breath whistled through her teeth. "Damn it."

"Grandma. Will someone tell me what's wrong?"

"You mean besides the demon residing inside your head?" Dexx pressed the medical tape back onto her skin.

Alma hit his arm lightly. “Hush your mouth, cub.”

“I can’t believe this is really happening.” Brian remained at the door, almost as if coming closer might contaminate him. “Exorcism. For real?”

“’Fraid so. Alma, we need a priest.”

She widened her hands. “Father Gregory is in Dallas.”

“Too far away.”

“There is a priest.” Brian took a small step into the room. “Another parish, not too far, I think. I’m guessing he would probably know about exorcisms and the like.”

Dexx frowned at Alma. “Using a different priest is a bad idea. They have to petition the Church. We don’t have time for that.”

“We’re in Louisiana.” Brian raised his eyebrows, his expression tight. “There’s a lot that goes on here the Church doesn’t know about.”

“Point. Can you get your priest on the phone and find out if he’s any good at this kind of thing?”

Brian disappeared down the hall.

Alma pressed her fingers against her eyelids. “Oh, sweetie.”

Paige’s head wobbled. “I know who the third person is.”

“Way to hold the punchline, Pea.” Dexx motioned for her to hurry up. “Who is it?”

“Sven. Sven Seven Tails.”

“A demon. A lot of good a court of law’s going to do them.” That answered so many of his questions. This was bad news. The symbols. The sacrifices. The brands. Everything rang with clarity.

Alma chucked her chin in agreement. “How did the demon get in?”

“Drug, mostly. I couldn’t tell what was real and what wasn’t.” Paige let out a sobbing breath. “I was so scared. And then he used my memories against me.”

No one asked what memories. Everyone knew.

Alma glared at him.

Dexx returned the glare.

Paige looked away.

Dexx ground his teeth. This was a mess.

And now he had to somehow fix it.

Before the demon did it for him.

Chapter 27

Dexx drove Jackie the forty-one miles down the road to the town of Denham Springs and Brian's priest. Dexx had an hour to kill with no time to lose.

Paige slept in the back seat using Alma as her pillow, and Alma guarded over her, stroking her hair.

Dexx wrung Jackie's wheel alone in the front seat. The highway stretched in front of him like a licorice whip. No lights to brighten the way, no cars to help pass the time. Just him and Jackie and a really long road of pitch-black forever. He gnawed on his thumbnail as Jackie flew smoothly over the pavement. They were in deep trouble. He knew that. He just didn't know how to get them out.

He dropped his head back in frustration, resting it against the seat as he drummed a beat on the steering wheel. No music. He didn't want to wake up Paige. One, because she needed the sleep. Two, because he didn't know who would come out first. And Jackie's sound had a lulling quality as they drove down the road.

He had to send the thing back. No doubt about it, but what about the consequences? What about Paige? If it came down to sending the demon back or keeping Paige alive, which would he choose? He knew which one it had to be. As soon as they showed their ugly asses, he revoked their visas. No questions. No talking. No playing. Just-send-me-a-postcard-from-hell-and-enjoy-the-trip. Quick. Easy. Simple.

But… *Paige.* She wasn't the same person he'd hauled back from New York, fresh from trying to kill her mother. Maybe they should have let her, considering the evil way she took… *abducted legally*… Leah. She really was a sweet kid, but definitely not the same after she lived with

Rachel for a while. The sulky angst teen years settled in her early. Would she have stayed a happy kid if Rachel had never happened?

He checked his mirror, watching Alma's weary form in the darkness.

Paige made it not easy. He didn't know if he could do what had to be done. He cared about her, even knowing how stupid it was. With his job, the traveling, the danger. He couldn't promise her he'd be home every night, and that was the normal side of things.

It was her gift. He'd known about it years ago. Hell, before he met her, he'd been sure she was the devil. She made demons something so simple, more complicated. A gray, not black and white. And now that she was an open door to the demons she summoned? What was he supposed to do? With her? For her? What could he do?

He had no idea.

The world went from black, to gray, to hesitant color as the sun rose in his review mirror. He had to come up with a plan. That's all he knew.

By the time he parked in front of the church, he hadn't gotten any closer to a real plan.

As the car purred in idle, he leaned down to peer at the church through the passenger window. "I sure hope this works. You know, having a priest do it instead of someone like me."

Alma squinted through the bright morning sunlight. "She'll probably be waking up soon." She pushed the seat in front of her forward and dragged her aging body out of the car with a groan. "Come on. Let's get this over with."

Dexx followed her lead. He popped the trunk, handing Alma his bag of goodies before retrieving Paige's unconscious body out of his back seat. His shoulder screamed at him.

No, it moaned. Loudly.

The main door to the church opened enough to show a man with brown hair.

Alma turned to Dexx, her white hair a frazzled mess, her clothes rumpled. Dexx hoped he didn't look that bad, but he wasn't making any bets on that one.

"Dexx, this is Andy. He will be assisting Father Staats."

"You know him?" Dexx couldn't be more surprised if Alma sprouted wings.

"He, um, he likes to be called Reece." Andy wrung his hands, his expression anxious.

"I worked with the good Father when I served." Alma's expression was tired, but friendly. "Andy came along later. But I never thought I would be bringing Paige to see him. Not like this, anyway."

"Great." Dexx flashed a pained smile. Andy was the epitome of wet-behind-the-ears. His jeans were nice, and his button-up shirt was pressed. Dexx raised his eyebrows instead of offering a hand. He hitched Paige a little higher, glancing down at her expectantly.

"Is this going to be, like, a real exorcism?" Andy rubbed his ear. "Like, really?"

Alma crossed her arms over her chest.

Dexx just stood there, Paige getting heavier with every *uh* and *like*.

"Oh, right." Andy scratched his head. "Right, right, right. Gotcha. Yeah. Let's, uh." He held the large wooden doors open. "Yeah, um, get her inside."

Dexx carried Paige through the threshold, into the large interior of the room of worship. His eyes crept higher and higher until they could go no further. The pale morning sun filtered through the small windows, shedding little light into the massive room. Pictures in gold frames of various saints lined the walls. He didn't know his saints. He didn't know his angels. He knew the Bible existed, sure. Had he ever read it? Hell, no. His mother had made him go to church occasionally. Had he paid attention? Again, hell no.

Andy brushed by him with a smile. “It isn’t much, but we bring the faith to the people.”

Dexx gave the other man the tough-guy nod as he followed.

Andy led him up the aisle toward the dais where the pulpit stood large and intimidating, presiding over the room. “Not all churches have to be impressive.”

Then why did it seem they all tried to intimidate?

“Watch out.” Andy pointed behind him. “Step up. They’re a little skinny. Don’t slip. Yeah. Step up. One more time. You got it.” He turned to lead the way through a door on the back wall between the choir section and the organ.

Doors lined the hallway, some open, some closed. It looked like a very inviting place for a church. Had *any* church ever been inviting, or was it that Paige needed help and they were the last resort?

Andy disappeared down a flight of stairs.

Dexx eyed them. “The basement. How fitting. Could we get any more cliché, please? Just once, I’d like to fight a big baddy in the daylight or in an attic or something. Why is it always in the bowels of the Earth?”

“Stop complaining,” Alma said, pushing past him.

Dexx flattened his lips in resignation, re-situated Paige’s dead weight in his arms again, and followed the old woman down the stairs to a large, open room. There were a few bare shelves in the far corner, and a table under a window so small a child would have a hard time fitting through. An older man stood under the bare fluorescent light wearing a priest’s collared shirt and jeans.

“Father Staats, it’s been a long time,” Alma said, offering the older man her hand.

“Please,” he said with a genuine smile, taking Alma’s hand in both of his. He kept her hand much longer than Dexx thought was appropriate. “Call me Reece. You really can. And far too long, Alma Whiskey.”

“Alma.” She gave the man a worn, fragile smile of her own. “This is Dexx and Paige.”

Dexx smiled at them both. Reece looked like a sun-weathered, solid man, someone who knew his faith and what he was doing. He could respect that. “Where should I put her?”

“Oh, right there will be fine for now,” Reece said, pointing to a wooden chair Dexx hadn’t noticed. The priest sighed tiredly. “We’ll have to bind her, I’m afraid, for her own safety as well as ours.”

“Yeah, well, I got a few tricks in my bag.” Dexx propped Paige’s unconscious body on the chair. His body breathed a sigh of relief without him. Holding her in a semi-sitting position, he searched for Andy. “Could use some help here.”

Andy held a length of rope like a frightened rabbit.

Dexx stood. “Tie her up. I’m going to gather a few things.”

“Son,” Reece said with the tranquilly peaceful smile that only priests or the divinely touched seemed to have. He grasped Dexx’s shoulders. “Leave this to me and my apprentice. We are properly taught to handle this.”

“Yeah, well, forgive me, Padre, but I like having a backup plan.” Dexx shook off the priest’s hands. “No offense. I’m sure your exorcism will work out ducky and all, but I gotta have my goodies.” He walked to the table and started rummaging through his bag.

Father Staats—Reece—pulled out his Bible.

“All right,” Dexx said, grabbing his notebook and chalk. “I’m going to set down a few safeguards and then you boys can get to work.”

Alma found a hard folding chair and sat down. “This could take a while.”

Dexx dropped to the ground, drawing the demon trap on the floor.

“Do you really think that will work?” Reece asked, as if he were speaking to a small child. “It’s a bit like keeping the light on to keep the

boogeyman away, don't you think?"

"Well, pardon me for needing the night light. I've met the damned thing."

Reece took in a deep breath. "All right. Let's begin."

Chapter 28

Dexx finished the trap and stood, studying it. He bent and added a few lines, then backed away. “It’s all yours, Padre. Take it away.”

“When Andy and I start, I don’t want either of you to talk. You don’t enter into conversation with the demon. You don’t challenge it or enrage it. You don’t interrupt us. You let us do our work. We don’t need any…” He gestured with his hand at Dexx. “Outside influences. We’re well practiced, and this rite has been in place for hundreds of years.”

Andy didn’t look well practiced or ready to face a demon. He was an amateur.

“It’s a holy ritual and should only be performed by trained people.”

Dexx crossed his arms over his chest. He had a hard time respecting the Church for this reason. Well, others, too. Reece honestly thought he was the only person qualified to send a demon home? Then again, they had opted not to use any of Dexx’s exorcisms because the victims usually ended up on a shady side of dead.

Reece met Dexx’s gaze and held it. “I don’t doubt your experience, son, but you do not have the invocation necessary in order to strike down something so vile.”

“I’ll jump in to help if needed.” Dexx dropped his leather-bound notebook on the table. “I might not be holy or anything, but I know how to lay one of these things down. Okey dokey?”

“Son,” Reece said. “For your own protection—”

“Stop calling me son. I’m not a part of your flock.” Dexx balled his hand into a fist. This had damned well better work.

Reece drew the sign of the cross in the air, closing his eyes in prayer.

Paige raised her head, waking. “Let me guess,” she said with a British

lilt to her words, “an exorcism. With a real priest, even. Oh, and I do mean real. How droll.”

“Where’s Paige?” Alma asked.

Paige’s head tipped back and forth. “Inside.” The demon smiled handsomely at the old woman. “Really, I must thank you and your daughter for making my work so easy. A broken soul is the easiest to invade. I didn’t have to do much. Just leave now and let me take her to do the job I have to do.”

“Alma,” Reece warned. “Do not talk to it. Do not bait it. Let me and Andy do our job.”

“That’s my granddaughter in there.” Alma crossed her arms over her chest. “You bring her back to me. Bring her back.”

Reece looked at Paige, then to Alma, then nodded. He took a flask from his assistant, poured water into his cupped hand, and threw it on the demon. It flinched, baring Paige’s teeth. The water turned to steam on contact. “Lord, have mercy on us. Christ, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us. Christ, hear us. Christ, graciously hear us. God, the Father of Heaven, have mercy on us.”

Dexx leaned toward Alma and whispered. “You don’t honestly think that all this God crap is really going to work, do you?”

The older woman let out a long, worried sigh. “If anyone can, Reece can.”

“Holy Virgin of Virgins, pray for us. St. Michael, pray for us. St. Gabriel, pray for us.”

“Oh, yes,” the demon said, throwing Paige’s head back. “Gabriel, come down and smite me to the earth once more.” It raised her head. “Why don’t you call Gabriel down here right now? It’d be a party, yeah?”

“All ye holy angels and archangels, pray for us.”

The demon laughed at Andy. “You’re going to need a lot more than

just prayer. Let me go so I can save you all."

"All ye holy patriarchs and prophets, pray for us."

Dexx rolled his eyes. "At this rate, he's more likely to bore the demon back to Hell."

Alma snorted.

"St. Thomas, pray for us. St. James, pray for us."

"I'm not kidding," Dexx said. "I now understand how the Catholic exorcism works. It takes bureaucracy to a whole new level for me."

"St. Bartholomew, pray for us."

"Bartholomew?" Dexx asked under his breath.

Alma bit her lips, her eyes dancing with a bare hint of humor.

"St. Simon, pray for us."

"Bloody hell." The demon tugged at the ropes, then caught sight of the markings on the floor. "Dexx? Is this your doin'?"

Dexx raised his eyebrows.

"Come on, Reece, I have things to do." The demon with Paige's face threw a smile at Dexx.

"People to kill?" Dexx asked.

"Dexx," Reece warned.

Dexx advanced on the demon. "I just want to ask one question."

The demon straightened Paige's shoulders. "What?"

Dexx stopped in front of it. "Why did you do it? I mean, what's so great about this realm that you don't have on your own?"

"You wouldn't understand, hunter."

"Really? Why?"

The demon narrowed Paige's eyes. "Maybe you would. You are a protector. As am I."

"Son, I really must ask you to—"

"I already told you to stop calling me son," Dexx snapped at the priest. "And I'm not leaving. I need to know why these damned things

keep coming back."

"I will not allow you to interrupt this ritual, Dexx," Reece said. "St. Nicholas, pray for us. All ye holy bishops and confessors, pray for us."

The demon tipped Paige's head. "My brethren and I are protected by the Church."

"Be merciful," Reece intoned. "O God. Be merciful, graciously hear us, O Lord. From everlasting death, O Lord, deliver us."

The demon twisted Paige's lips into what might have been considered a smile.

"Through the coming of the Holy Ghost, The Paraclete, O Lord, deliver us," Reece said, stressing his words to make them heard.

Alma laid her hand on Dexx's arm. "Come on. Let's let the good Father do his job."

Dexx needed answers, though. He needed to know what he could do to ensure these damned things stopped coming back.

She headed toward the stairs. "Let's give them some peace."

"That Thou wouldst vouchsafe to grant peace and unity to all Christian people. We beseech Thee, hear us."

The demon threw Paige's head back and howled, shaking the building on its very foundations.

Andy stood planted on the spot, his eyes wide. He looked like he might throw up or crap his pants at any moment.

Alma raised an eyebrow.

Reece was shaken, but not deterred. "I shall oust you, demon."

"You can try," Lucius's voice slithered out in a hiss. "But I shall succeed. My mission is to protect your unworthy race from the very thing hell's father believes you can handle."

"I still don't get that," Dexx scoffed. "That shit doesn't even make sense."

Lucius chuckled. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Even the unbelievers

believe God is good, and the angels are their protectors, while the demons are bad. Why is that? Have you *read* the holy book?"

"That is the power of the word of Christ," Reece said, opening his Bible. "'When the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the trumpet blast and the mountain smoke, they all feared and trembled.'"

"You want thunder and lightning?" The demon smiled. "I'll give you thunder and lightning." He howled again in his unearthly voice. "*Caulnudrim alphirus. Delnion oldoro*." Inky black covered Paige's eyes. The veins at her temples burned hot and orange.

Dexx stumbled backwards. The demon trap should have kept the demon's powers inside, like a cage. He bit his lip. Lucius wasn't just a demon. He was a human turned demon. That had to change things, but enough to make a difference?

"'So they took up a position much farther away and said to Moses, "You speak to Him and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die."'"

"*Elnequrio phosta auldero machra*."

Thunder shook the windowpane.

Reece advanced on the demon, his hand outstretched as he continued to read from his Bible. "'Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid, for God has come to you only to test you and put His fear upon you, lest you should sin.'"

"*Dolnia*," Lucius cried out, blasting the sound of his trumpeting word into Reece's face. Outside, a blinding flash filled the darkened window. An almost immediate deafening roll of thunder answered.

Undaunted, Reece set his hand upon the demon's head and continued. "'Still the people remained at a distance while Moses approached the cloud where God was. The Lord told Moses, 'You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven.'"

"I know He exists, you fool," the demon spat. "You think that by

reading some scripture, telling me of His existence, that you weaken me? I was there, you spineless twit."

Dexx stood ready to react but didn't know how. All traces of Paige were gone. In her place reigned something ethereal. Real. Terrifying.

"Then look upon the power of Christ," Reece growled, pulling a brass cross out of an inside pocket of his jacket.

"He was a man," the demon said, his voice rich and dark with rage. He pulled against the ropes, snarling and snapping.

Reece reached out after dipping his thumb in Holy Water, making the sign of the cross. It smoked and sizzled on the demon's forehead.

The demon roared. Thunder rattled the building for several deafening moments.

Everyone bent down to cover their ears, looking at each other in horror.

Then the demon's head fell forward. Loose strands of hair fell on either side of the very Paige-like face.

Andy crept forward. "Is it over?"

Chapter 29

"Not likely." Dexx straightened, his expression tight. "It's shifting, twisting its plan, trying to find our weaknesses. It's not done yet. Trust me."

"Oh," Andy said in a small voice.

Reece stepped back and inhaled deep. "Well, let's move on then, shall __"

Paige's head whipped up.

Dexx watched her, searching for signs of the demon. Fear etched along the edges of her face. "Paige."

"Grandma?" she asked in a frightened whisper.

"Here, Pea." Alma hurried to her granddaughter, stopping at the edge of the circle.

Tears sprang to Paige's eyes. "I'm so scared. I can't fight him. He's so strong."

"You can," Alma said with the fierce belief of a mother. "You can do this."

Paige's face crumpled as she fell against the ropes bound across her chest. "I'm so scared."

Alma hesitated for a moment, then stepped into the circle, wrapping her granddaughter in her arms. "It's okay, baby. We'll get through this."

Paige's expression shifted, anger slithering into place.

"Alma," Dexx cried.

Paige lifted her head with demonic hatred. "I'm scared of what I'll do to you. Go away before I do something I regret."

Andy held his hands open and low, his eyes and mouth wide.

Reece's lips parted soundlessly.

A dawning horror lit Alma's face. "I did what I had to."

"Rachel might have taken Lee away from me physically, but you stripped her from my mind." Paige's voice was hoarse. Her gaze focused with a blinding brilliance.

Dexx reached the edge of the circle, preparing to launch himself at Alma, to knock her away.

"I'm going to strip you from my mind." Paige released a ripping wind, knocking everyone except Alma back against the walls.

Dexx's shoulder blade connected painfully with the wall before he fell to the ground.

Alma struggled against the force, her hair whipping around her face. Her hands curled into fists, then she brought them up. Yellow and white light curled around them as they moved in ways Dexx had never seen before. "All Mother, help me. You are my strength." She trembled in place, the two forces battling against each other, waxing and waning. Alma stood for a minute. Two minutes.

The light crackled out like sickly lightning, turning a dull yellow and orange against invisible forces. Alma mouthed words lost in the maelstrom, then her magicks faded and died.

All the magick slowed, calmed, then dissipated as though it never was. The quiet it left seemed as loud as the storm.

"You. I hate what you did to me. How could you?" Paige relaxed and collapsed against the ropes.

Alma crumpled to the ground.

Dexx rushed to the old woman's side on all fours. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck and judging by the way everyone groaned as they picked themselves up, they didn't feel much better. He rolled Alma to her back, lightly slapping her cheeks. "Alma."

She didn't stir.

He glanced up at Paige or the demon or whoever the fuck she was at

the moment, but she-he-it was out cold. “Alma. Wake up.”

She moaned, raising a gnarled hand to her head. “I fell for it.”

“Yeah.” Dexx dragged her away from the circle without disturbing the trap. Not that it’d helped much. He hurried to repair a small break in the salt line.

Alma sat up, studying the carnage of the magickal battle.

Dexx stayed low, looking for injuries. “You did. We both did. You old —” He took in a startled breath as he met her gaze.

“What?”

“Ca—um, can you see me?”

“Clear as day.” She stopped for a moment and reached up to touch her left eye. “I can. For the first time in years, I can really see.”

“That’s great, ’cause—uh—” He searched the room for help.

Alma pinned him with her strange and empty eyes. “What?”

He licked his lips, unable to meet her gaze. “They’re white. They’re both just white. No color. No pupil. No nothing. Just white.”

Shock fell over Alma’s face. “They’re what?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

Paige—no. The demon raised its head. “A gift. Free me.”

“Alma,” Dexx said, helping her toward the stairs. “Wait in the church and stay there.”

Alma stood in stupefied wonder. “I can see.”

“I’m sorry, Alma, but now is not the time. Go upstairs and wait for us.”

“Now that you understand the importance of this ritual,” Reece said, picking himself off the floor, “please allow Andy and myself to conduct this exorcism without interruption.”

Dexx breathed slowly. If it had chosen any other vessel, he’d be gone right now.

“God, by Your name save me, and by Your might defend my cause,” Reece said, never taking his eyes from the demon.

“God, hear my prayer; hearken to the words of my mouth.” Andy’s voice shook as he pressed himself against the wall.

“You can’t keep the gate closed on your own,” the demon said. “Even if you tried, even if you were mad enough to think you could, you’d fail. Horribly. Miserably. You *need* me.”

The older priest continued, oblivious. “For haughty men have risen up against me, and fierce men seek my life; they set not God before their eyes.”

“That’s what you think,” Dexx answered.

“See, God is my helper.” Andy’s voice cracked. “The Lord sustains my life.”

“So, send me back. What’s your plan? They’re comin’ either way.”

“Turn back the evil upon my foes; in Your faithfulness destroy them.” Reece held his Bible in front of him like a shield.

Dexx shrugged.

Reece set his face in grim determination. “Freely will I offer You sacrifice.”

“Save your words, priest,” the demon spat impatiently.

“Save your servant.” Reece advanced slowly on the demon.

“How would you do it?” Dexx took a step forward. “What’s your plan?”

“Let her find in You, Lord, a fortified tower in the face of the enemy.”

Lucius gave Dexx a wordless smirk.

The demon didn’t have a plan either.

“Let the enemy have no power over her and the son of iniquity be powerless to harm her. Lord, send her aid from Your holy place and watch over her from Zion.”

A scream ripped through the demon’s throat. That was both demonic

and feminine.

“Stop,” a new voice commanded. “He’s telling the truth. You need him.”

Dexx spun on Balnore in surprise. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Lord, heed my prayer and let my cry be heard by You. The Lord be with you.”

Balnore looked bored, like there were a million other things he could have been doing at that moment. He tipped his chin toward Paige, eyes on Dexx. “She summoned me.”

Reece stroked the pages in his book lovingly before he began again. “I command you, unclean spirit, whose name is Lucius, along with all your minions now attacking this servant of God—”

“Face reality, Dexx.” Balnore straightened his shirt sleeve. “You can’t keep the gate closed. We need Lucius’s help. He’s a guardian of that gate. Gabriel trapped him between worlds for a reason.”

Lucius screamed.

“—by the mysteries of the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Reece shouted, “by the descent of the Holy Spirit, by the coming of our Lord for judgment—”

The demon whipped his head around. “If I go, I’ll take her with me. She’s the only other who can use the key to keep it closed.”

“What are you saying, demon?” Dexx growled.

“—I command you to obey me to the letter, I who am a minister of God despite my unworthiness; nor shall you be emboldened to harm in any way this creature of God—”

“An alliance,” the demon said.

Balnore shrugged. “It would be smart.”

“Says the damned demon who bound her gift in the first fucking place.” Dexx pressed his fist against his mouth, debating something he shouldn’t be entertaining. Wouldn’t be entertaining if it weren’t for the

fact the damn thing was in Paige's body.

"I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every specter from hell and all your fell companions; in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Reece made the sign of the cross in the air before him.

"Do you really think you humans can do this on your own?" Lucius jerked against his bonds. "You know it has been opened once. How much more do you want to lose? Which do you think you would prefer? The angel who would smite you for your sins, or the demon who would devour your soul?"

"Be gone," Reece commanded.

The demon writhed in the chair, a low growl emanating from him.

"And stay far from this creature of God," the priest continued, again making the sign of the cross. "For it is He who commands you. He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven into the depths of hell."

"I was born here, you asshole," Lucius said between clenched teeth.

"It is He who commands you, He who once stilled the sea and the wind and the storm."

Paige's twisted voice rose in a pain-filled cry.

"Harken, therefore, and tremble in fear, Lucius, you enemy of the faith, you foe of the human race, you begetter of death, you robber of life—"

"Don't send me back."

Balnore let out a long, put-upon sigh.

"—you corrupter of justice, you root of all evil and vice. Seducer of men, betrayer of the nations, instigator of envy, font of avarice—"

The demon jerked to the side and shouted something Dexx didn't understand.

"—fomenter of discord, author of pain and sorrow. Why, then, do you stand and resist, knowing as you must that Christ the Lord brings your

plans to nothing? Fear Him—"

"The key," the demon cried in a deafening voice. "You must protect the key!"

Balnore's shoulders slumped as he rolled his eyes.

"Be gone, then, in the name of the Father," Reece said, making the sign of the cross.

Balnore moved with lightning speed and grabbed Paige's shoulder. He stared intently into the demon's eyes. The air seemed to still. The storm outside silenced.

"—and of the Son, and of the Holy—"

An explosion of sound interrupted the priest, tossing the man across the room.

The light bulb burst overhead, leaving them in dusky darkness.

Dexx peered through the poor light to see the aftermath.

Out of thin air, a body manifested. Tall, bald, and heavily tattooed, wearing a burgundy robe embroidered in gold. Dexx's eyes widened as Paige slumped forward against the ropes holding her.

Oh…shit.

Two very real, very solid demons.

What in the nine hells had they done?

Chapter 30

Dexx passed his wild-eyed stare around the chaos. Which fire to put out first? The priest who couldn't understand why demons should be allowed inside his church? The demon *summoner* who was no longer possessed, but comatose? The witch who seemed fine, but couldn't be because she looked wickedly creepy? Or the two demons who were whispering at the far end of the cathedral about God only knew what. Or…maybe He didn't. Who knew?

Time for an honest assessment instead of a flying-by-the-seat-of-his-pants freak-out. The demons chatted, but flames hadn't spewed forth. No apocalypse yet. He decided to let that one sit for the moment.

Reece stood guard over the two of them, powerless if the two decided to bring hell to his church. Alma scoured a book—which wasn't her grimoire, thank you very much—and seemed quite content being left alone to her reading. Grumpy old witch. Paige still hadn't awakened after expelling Lucius from her body.

Paige needed to be fixed first. All right. So, maybe the demons were the bigger threat, but Balnore seemed to have his situation under control. Besides, Dexx didn't know what to do with them, or if he *did,* he could only deal with one before he'd be un-alived.

He thumped his fist against one of the square columns supporting the vaulted roof, and with a huff of resignation, retreated to the back of the church. He didn't know what to do with Paige either, but he would at the very least be with her.

Reece's office was the last door on the left. Dexx had left Paige on the leather couch to rest.

He leaned against the doorway, releasing a pent-up breath through

pursed lips. Did he even know how to help Paige? He was a guy, oddly enough. What did a man do with a woman who was falling apart?

Have sex with her.

Not likely.

Dexx stepped around the couch and stopped. Paige was gone.

He returned quickly to the cathedral. Where could she have gone? “Hey, has anyone seen Paige?”

Reece ignored him, at last knee-deep in conversation with the two demons. They seemed to be rather invested in the discussion as well.

Alma raised her head, her white eyes startling in the dark of the church. “She’s gone?”

“Kinda why I asked if you’d seen her.” Dexx spun on his heel and retraced his steps. “Never mind, I’ll find her.”

“With everything going on,” Alma said, following, “you’ll excuse me, but I’m coming with you.”

Dexx rolled his shoulder. He wasn’t into family drama. He didn’t know how to deal with emotional women, Whiskey women most of all. They each had their own superpower, which brought “scary” to whole new levels. He searched the rooms on either side of the long hallway, making it to a door that led outside.

He glimpsed Paige through the small window. Damn. How had she got there so fast? “Found her.”

Alma reached for the handle.

He raised a hand, his lips flat. “Look, she’s hurting. We don’t know what state of mind she’s in or how she’s going to react. Maybe you should let me scope things out first. You know. Ensure a safe approach.”

Alma smashed her wrinkled lips shut and crossed her arms over her full chest.

“You’ve got the best intentions. I understand that. However.” He shrugged at her, his mouth shut, his eyebrows raised.

Alma's eerie white gaze penetrated him.

Reece walked in from the side, his hands together in front of him. He waited patiently, but something in his stance said that his patience had reached an end. He nodded at Dexx with his knowing hint of a smile.

Dexx licked his lips. "And, um, Alma?"

She relaxed her arms a smidge.

"Get sunglasses." Dexx threw her a tight smile and stepped onto the unwelcoming concrete porch. He heard Reece greet Alma, but he had no desire at all to listen to them. Someone somewhere else needed him more.

Paige sat on a masonry block leaning against the side of the building, a plume of smoke issuing from her mouth in the chilled air.

"I know I didn't bring those." Dexx closed the door behind him.

She pointed with her chin, her brown eyes vacant.

The rain cascaded from the roof, creating a curtain. The discordant tapping of the water created an oddly comforting curtain of sound.

Andy stood at the far end of the long porch inside the wall of water, a cigarette in his shaking fingers. He hunched his shoulders and pressed himself into the wall, away from Paige.

"Hey, Andy," Dexx called. "How much for the entire pack?"

That poor kid had been put through the wringer. Dexx *might* have handled his first demon encounter better, but probably not. He'd been shaken pretty good that first time.

"It gets better. About as scary as your first time with a girl. Now *those* are scary." He cocked a grin, hoping to ease Andy back to Earth.

Andy dug the cigarettes out of his pocket and tossed them to Dexx. He fled inside the building.

Dexx took in a deep breath and walked over toward Paige. He thumped a cigarette out of the pack and held his other hand out.

Paige gave him the lighter and took the pack from him. "Didn't know

you smoked."

"Don't." He lit up and let out the smoke with a choked cough. "Not since I started hunting." He gave her back the lighter. "Seems appropriate, though. Been one hell of a day."

She nodded and lit another.

"You going to do anything stupid?"

Her cold and apathetic expression didn't shift as she ignored him.

"Besides chain-smoke, of course, because this"—he held his cigarette out—"could kill you."

"I don't care."

Dexx leaned against the wall, studying her. Smoke in. Smoke out. He shifted his attention to the falling rain. A car drove past, pushing water in its wake. "'Course you do. You can't keep on like this, you know."

Paige's lips curled in a flinch of derision.

He grimaced at his cigarette. The nicotine felt good as it hit his system, but it tasted like ass. He lifted his eyebrows and took another drag. "Want to tell me what happened back there?"

"Where?"

"In the basement. With your grandmother."

She blinked, and her expression softened minutely. She let out a puff of smoke and leaned her head against the siding of the church. "Nope."

"What did you do to Alma? Did you intend to hurt her?"

Paige sucked on her top lip and bit down on it. "I don't know."

Dexx tossed his cigarette out into the rain and knelt beside her. "I kinda know what you're going through." He took her cold hand in his much warmer one. "I mean, when my brother—" Who was he kidding? "You know, what I went through doesn't even compare. I'm just going to sit here and be your friend."

Paige's fingers fluttered under his. "Hurt is hurt."

He met her chocolate-brown gaze. "Yeah, I guess it is, and I hurt a lot.

I felt—I don't know. Ashamed because I didn't help enough, like I'd let my brother down. He'd needed me."

"Leah'd needed me, too. Leslie told me and I didn't listen. *Balnore* told me, and I didn't listen. I was so stupid." She flicked the ember from her cigarette and studied the end.

"So was I. I was so damned mad. I couldn't see straight, couldn't think straight, and it didn't matter what anyone told me, whether it was my mom, or Nick, or—" He whispered, "Rachel."

Paige took in a deep breath and slid her attention to the rain. "I keep forgetting you were practically raised in her house."

"Not really. Just after my dad left. Nick took me in like a stray dog."

"I feel alone."

Dexx bit the inside of his lip. "Are you? Or did you isolate yourself?"

"At first, I felt safer on my own. Now, I just feel alone."

He gave her fingers a squeeze. "Then don't be."

He watched her teeter on the edge, the edge of icy apathy and blazing fury.

He knew that edge. He'd walked it before. "Things aren't gonna get better, not for a while. Those years without her are lost. You'll never get them back."

Tears studded her eyes like silent screams attempting to escape.

"But"—he lifted his own cigarette higher — "you *can* get her back. You won't ever have those years again, but you can have others." He gently pulled the cigarette from Paige and flicked it into the rain.

"What if I can't? What if I've screwed this up beyond salvaging?"

"You still gotta fight. You're trying to tell me you can't fight? You?"

She extricated her hand from his and rolled the pack of cigarettes between her palms. "For a while now, it's felt like something inside me broke. I didn't know what it was, didn't know how to fix it. I thought I was unlovable, but now I know."

“Know what? If you’re playing something your mother said in your head, stop it. Cease and desist. Immediately. That woman has no business being a part of your life. She has no place in what you think or do. And you should never, ever, ever pay attention to anything she says.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment, then opened them again.

“I know what you’re doing. You’re replaying memories long forgotten, re-remembering the shit she fed you. Stop. She wanted to destroy you. She succeeded, not because you’re inferior or deserved it, but because she surprised you by stooping to a level you never thought possible.”

“That’s—” She massaged her temple. “That’s true, but I don’t know how to put it back together again.”

“Me either.” He got up and dragged her to her feet. “We’ll find a way, though. I promise. You are one tough nut and I…”

Her gaze rose to meet his.

His hand shook with the intensity of his conviction. “I believe in you. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

She pressed her lips together as the rain fell. Some time passed. Could have been seconds, maybe minutes. He felt her thinking things through. She could have all the time she needed. Finally, she nodded.

Balnore and the new demon, Lucius walked out on the patio. “Peanut. It’s time to go. This has been tiring for everyone, but we need to return. Events will outpace us soon if you aren’t there.”

Dexx could have disintegrated them both where they stood. Fuck his lousy timing.

They walked in from the storm to the worship room. Reece and Alma stood apart, obviously from a discussion.

Worry highlighted Reece’s blue eyes as he assessed Paige. “Do you think it’s safe? She should rest.”

“She’ll be fine,” Alma said, her back ramrod straight as she stared at

her granddaughter. “She’s a Whiskey.”

Paige didn’t acknowledge her as she strode toward the door.

“Well, we can’t let her leave without us.” Dexx grabbed his duffle bag. He paused on the front porch, the small roof shielding him from the rain. “We’re going to get wet. Great.”

Balnore squinted at the storm. “I think I could use a ride.”

“This just gets better and better.” Dexx dug the keys out of his pocket. “Padre, I hope you’re staying here, ’cause this boat’s full.”

“No, no.” Reece stood in the doorway and gazed at the two demons with something of mixed respect and fear. He advanced on Alma. “I hope we can stay in touch more.”

Alma licked her lips and ducked her head before nodding. “I’d like that.”

Dexx glanced at the old man. “Well, thanks for the help. I’ll try to keep us on the winning side.”

“I’m sure you will.” The priest shook his head. “Never lose faith in the Lord.”

Dexx took in a deep breath as the rain slackened minutely…or not. “You, either. A lot of people are out there who depend on you.”

“And you, my son.”

Dexx sighed and stepped into the drizzle. “Don’t call me son.”

Chapter 31

"I call shotgun," Balnore said, ignoring the pouring heavens and striding toward the car.

"No offense, Bal," Dexx called, opening the trunk to deposit his bag. "But I'd prefer Paige up front."

"Thanks," Alma said. "Stuff me in the back with them."

"I'll sit in the back with Alma and Lucius," Paige said, her voice low and quiet.

"Uh, yeah, no." Dexx shut the trunk with a note of finality, the rain flying off Jackie's shiny rump and splashing him further. "That's a bad mix. You're in the front. Deal with it."

Alma climbed into the back seat, Balnore following careful suit. Lucius walked to Dexx's side of the car and stared in confusion.

"Car. Modern wonders." Dexx gestured toward the back seat. "Get in."

Lucius did so with little grace, his expression dark as he sat squished in the back seat.

Dexx grinned as he reset the driver's seat. He pushed it back a tad farther than he was used to. He made sure he could still reach the pedals, then started the long trek back to the inn.

Paige kept to herself, but she was far from the wreck he'd witnessed minutes before. Cool, calm, and collected.

"You realize you smell like an ashtray, right?" He kept her in his peripheral as he eased away from the last stop sign in town.

"Yeah. My mouth feels like an ashtray." She rubbed her tongue along her teeth with a yuck-face. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"I do." He grabbed the pack and tossed it out the window.

Jackie rolled out of the little town and onto the two-lane highway.

Towering trees festooned with choking ivy lined the road for as far as the eye could see. Forty-one miles. Might be a very quiet ride unless someone figured out something to talk about. A very uncomfortable quiet ride.

He looked in his rearview mirror and got an eyeful of Lucius. “So, Luce. Good job with all the dirty talk when you had Pea possessed. Stick with civil, next time, ‘kay?”

The demon’s black, beady eyes bored into the mirror.

Dexx smiled, enjoying the obvious distaste the man-demon had for the nickname. After what he’d put Paige through, it was the least Dexx could do. “Luce, what more can you tell us about this fabulous gate, the key, and how to keep everything closed?”

Lucius shifted his attention to the window next to him.

“He’s a bit shy,” Balnore said cheerfully, wedged between Lucius and Alma. “Has been ever since he was a small boy. He’s got a lot to learn about how to communicate properly.” He emphasized those last two words directly into Lucius’s ear.

“I communicate fine, thank you.”

Balnore raised his eyebrows and snuggled in. “That’s apparent. If you’d communicated clearer, perhaps these guys wouldn’t’ve been so keen to kick you back to Hell.”

“I challenge you to do better. That place was a bloody trap. No way in. No way out. No one to talk to. No way to get a message outside.”

Dexx made sure to pay most of his attention on the road. “Luce, how’d Mike and Malika find you?”

“Mike and who?” A confused frowned furrowed Lucius’s face. “Right. The witch and her boyfriend. I don’t know. Possibly through Sven.”

Paige’s wandering fingers stilled.

Who did she want to hear about most? Sven certainly scared her. Dexx’d set the bore for Sven and see how Paige did. “Wait,” Dexx said.

“Wasn’t that who you thought this was before we found out it was Lucius?”

She nodded.

“Who and what is Sven?” Alma asked.

“Sven Seven Tails.” Paige pressed her knuckles into her lips.

“He’s a trickster,” Balnore added. “An evil trickster. His main goal is to create mayhem.”

“So he’s not a *cuddly* demon,” Dexx said.

“Cuddly?” Balnore met Dexx’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Demons aren’t cuddly.”

“I thought you were all about healing and shit.”

“No. We’re about getting you morons to accept responsibility for your own damned actions.”

“Oh. I think I hit a nerve.”

“Dexx.” Paige took in a deep breath and let it out. “How many assholes can we fit in one car?”

Dexx sucked air between his lips and his teeth, his eyes to the roof, pretending to count. “Many?”

Balnore didn’t add anything.

“Seven Tails,” Lucius said with his British lilt, “has always been about bringing destruction. He thinks of you humans as playthings.”

“You humans.” Dexx snorted. “You’re a human.”

“Who’s lived many lifetimes? I think I’m a bit more than a mere mortal, don’t you?”

“Rub it in. But how many of those were… say… on the inside of dead?”

“Dexx,” Paige said.

“Yes, dear. So, do we have a better idea what we’re walking into now?”

“Oh, definitely.” Lucius thumped in the seat, glaring at Balnore. “Do

we have to ride in this infernal contraption?"

"For the moment, yes, we do. Do you not think this superior to a buggy?" Balnore asked, his eyes closed.

"Ms. Whiskey," Lucius said, "would you do us the very great honor of commanding me out of this ghastly carriage?"

"No."

"Ghastly?" Dexx mouthed. "I'll have you know this is the *pinnacle* of human design."

Paige shook her head, her expression dry. "What should we be searching for? Right now, we know about Jones and Malika."

"This is getting confusing," Alma said, crushed between the two demons. "Why can't you just call him Mike, like everyone else? And don't say the word 'civilian.' I'm sick and tired of hearing you throw that word around."

"Well, it's true," Paige said, her tone sour. "I'll try to remember to refer to him by his first name. He's a disgrace to the force, anyway."

"That he is." Dexx didn't usually have anything good to say about cops, but he respected them. They went out there, risked their lives every day. As long as they weren't working on occult cases, they were heroes. Plain and simple. "Condescending."

Paige took a second to replay what he said. Once she got it, she snorted. "That was bad."

Lucius frowned at them.

"Look, Luce, if I have to explain every joke and one-liner to you, you're going to bring down the fun factor."

Extreme deadpan filled the rearview mirror.

"I didn't get that one," Alma grumbled.

Dexx let his head fall against the seat. "Right. So, Luce, what can you tell us that we don't already know?"

"The key is in three parts."

“Three parts as in broken, or three parts as in made that way?”

“Broken. A long time ago, things went all to cock.”

“All to what?”

“Seriously, if I have to explain everything I say, hunter, you’re going to bring the fun factor down.”

“Oof.” Okay. Score one for the demon.

“Someone took the key and released hell on Earth. The demons rose, and for years, the two forces battled each other for dominance. Let us say things went balls up in a big way.”

“Right.” British slang in the backseat. Who needed Graham Norton? “Only none of that’s in the history books.”

“You don’t think so? Are you really such a cabbage? Demons and angels are embedded in your history. Every war. Every miracle. We’re there.”

Did he seriously call Dexx a cabbage? “All right. So someone opened the gate and a big bad came out. So what?”

“My brethren and I fought to seal the gate, and in so doing, the key shattered.”

“They can’t use it then. This whole key thing is a waste.”

“I had thought so.” Lucius paused.

Concentrating on the road, something quippy failed to rise to Dexx’s tongue.

“Gabriel bound me between realms for a reason. The witch discovered a way to at least partially open the gate for short periods of time.”

“The ghost,” Dexx said.

“All those demons,” Alma said.

“The demons could have been gathering over the past several years,” Paige said, her voice harsh. “After all, they knew how to get up here before someone started messing around with the key, and I wasn’t around to send them all back when their jobs were done.”

“How does that work?” Dexx asked, stretching his one good shoulder. The other one throbbed, giving him a headache. He’d probably overdone it. The doc had said to rest it. Granted, he wasn’t working as hard as he normally did, but he didn’t think the doctor would have called this resting, either. “I mean, how do you guys come up here without the use of the gate?”

“Man’s soul is their doorway,” Paige said.

“And why can’t angels use this doorway?” Dexx asked.

“Who says they don’t?” Balnore grunted. “It helps that our guardians are missing in action. One of their primary duties is to keep track of the demons’ walkings.”

“‘Walkings,’” Dexx mouthed, his eyebrows raised. “So why’d you bind Paige?”

“I was talking about Lucius. Paige is a summoner.”

“But she said that’s what she was doing.”

“Only when the guardians are gone.”

“There is thirteen of us,” Lucius said. “Having one disappear should not have been a prob—”

“There were thirteen of you,” Balnore corrected. “You’re the only one we’ve found.”

Alarm fluttered across Lucius’s face. “The last?”

“Hard to say if you’re the last. You all disappeared at about the same time. After you were gone, Lucifer shut himself off from everyone.”

“So, what you’re saying is hell has gone to the dogs.” Dexx chuckled. “That’s funny. I mean, really.”

“This could be bad,” Paige said.

“Yes,” Balnore acknowledged.

“Bad how?” Alma asked.

“The last demon I talked to mentioned something stirring in hell.” Paige put her fingertips to the rain-dotted window. “However, with

Lucifer in control, I knew it couldn't get too bad. He maintains order. Without it, the demons are…" She trailed off with a shrug.

"Ambling around without a leader," Dexx finished.

Paige pursed her lips and nodded. "But that also means someone is vying for power. Someone has probably already started working to gain enough prestige to take the throne right out of Lucifer's control."

"That can't be good."

"No." Paige stretched her legs as far as the seat let her. "And with the guardians gone?"

"There's no one to stand in their way."

"So," Paige said, "just to be clear. Your theory is that the greatest trickster, Sven, is working to take over hell."

"Why else would he be doing all this?"

"This," Lucius said, his voice low, "the trapping of my brethren and I is not the work of the Fallen."

"What do you mean?"

"We can enter easily even without a gate."

Dexx tapped his fist against the steering wheel. "Then why—"

"The angels," Lucius said, raising his voice. "They cannot use you so easily. They need the gate to roam the Earth."

Paige twisted to look at Lucius. "You said Gabriel bound you."

"Yes."

"And backed Rachel," Balnore said, "in taking Leah."

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "That broke you."

"No shit, Sherlock," Dexx said.

"So why would the archangels need the demon summoner out of the game, and how does that have anything to do with Sven?"

Chapter 32

On the ride back to St. Francisville, Balnore requested Paige send him and Lucius out to track down their leads. Dexx dropped them off and then continued back to the inn with a snoring Alma in the back.

They checked back in at the hotel where she let Dexx do all the talking. Not that he needed to do much. The new guy—or the old one. Paige never got the whole story—sat and listened with half an ear or less. Gerry had more interest in his tablet screen than anything Dexx had to say. He covered with a lot of “Uh huh” and “hmm” with no real interest. They left him watching the screen without even saying bye. Gerry didn’t seem to even notice they’d been there.

Paige got right into work went they entered the room, digging at photos and reports. Something still wasn’t right even after Lucius had been evicted. It was as if she was still fighting to remain in her own body, though not to the same extent. It could be the aftereffects of possession. She’d never been possessed before.

Dexx went to bed soon after Alma left the room and, although Paige was tired, her head buzzed too much to sleep.

She wondered if there was more to the strangeness in her body, to the feeling of wrongness. What was it Dexx had seen at the station? He’d been freaked out. She remembered that, but only that.

Her grandmother was a different matter altogether. Whatever Lucius had done, the wounds he’d reopened, the memories he’d brought back, Paige couldn’t stand looking at the other woman. She needed Alma to go home.

The old woman wasn’t pleased.

Paige really didn’t care.

Still, forcing Alma and Tru to leave had been harder than she'd thought. The situation was huge and felt a lot bigger than she was ready for. She couldn't afford to be a pansy, and they needed someone of Alma's caliber on the case. A strong kitchen witch with incredible white magick? Yeah. She wanted that.

But it belonged to the same woman who had made being possessed possible.

No. She needed people on her team she could trust.

She trusted two people. Brian White and Dexx Colt.

Leaving Dexx in bed, she prepared to be potentially reckless. She knew better, but she had a lot of extra energy to shake off. She called up her scry globe, searching for Sven. She found a pocket of demons instead, in an area just outside of town. The sooner she could get that key and send him and all his demon friends back, the sooner she could go home. But something was wrong with her gift and she needed to find out what that was. The best way to do that was to find demons and send them back the way she always did.

However, she wasn't stupid enough to go alone. She called for backup.

The globe led her to the outskirts of nowhere. Trees crowded the scene. She'd parked where the road stopped. It disappeared into the forest. A rickety iron fence poked through the vines, fighting its way out.

Chief Brian White got out of his car and walked along the hard-packed dirt road.

Paige watched him through the side mirror as a slight breeze caressed her face.

He set his hand on the door and leaned over. "Paige."

"Brian." They'd experienced too much together to keep the boundaries of protocol between them. It felt awkward. She didn't even call her partner in Denver by his first name. But Brian White had seen her

possessed. Her partner hadn't.

He nodded once, as if telling her he agreed with her use of his name. "What are we doing here?"

Paige opened the door, shoving the keys in her pocket. "My scry globe showed a group of demons. They're close. I want to check it out."

"And that's a good idea?"

Now that she had control of her gift again? Yeah. "They might have information."

"But if they're just minions?"

"Then they won't. But—" She shrugged. "I need to get myself back in the game. At the very least, I get practice on taking them out again."

"And the real reason we're here?"

She sighed. "There's a group of demons and the reason they might be here is to guard the key, whether they know that or not."

"Oh."

"Yeah." She unclipped her gun. Not that it'd be useful, but she always felt better with it in her hand.

"Do you think it's possible this Sven guy turned Mike?"

"They're not vampires, Chief."

He flicked his gaze at her, his lips quirked.

A gravel pathway overtaken by weeds and grass led them into the heart of the forest.

They reached the outskirts of an old cemetery. A tall, full tree with hanging Spanish moss presided over the scene, giving it an austere feel.

"I don't get it," Brian said. "St. Mary's Episcopal Church should be sacred ground."

"Is that where we are?" She'd seen the place where the demons were. She hadn't been able to tell the exact location. "Demons can go anywhere."

"But a church?"

“You’re going to have to get over these misconceptions you have about church and demons.”

He grunted.

They walked past a cracked tomb, the door barely ajar.

A bad feeling crept into her chest. “Is this an active church?”

“No. When they put in the highway, it left St. Mary’s inaccessible. No one could get here, and they couldn’t raise enough to build a new road.”

“I was able to drive here.”

He shook his head. “Not to the drive.”

That sounded stupid. “So, it’s abandoned.”

“Yes.” He jerked his gun to the side.

Paige went still beside him, her ears peeled. She caught his gaze and shook her head.

He tipped his head, concentrating, then relaxed. “Must have been an animal.”

Of course, he said it in a whisper. “Did you want to stay in the car?”

“Nope. What good do you think I’m going to be in a demon fight?”

“I doubt there will be one.” She stepped around a headstone she hadn’t seen until she was right on top of it. 1898–1898. A child.

“Do you think they’re in the church?”

“Maybe.” Her skin buzzed as if she’d stepped through an electro-static curtain. They were either close, or something strange was taking place there. Maybe she was feeling the key? She’d gone there without much of a plan and was starting to realize how stupid she’d been. This felt like a “too stupid to live moment.”

The thick air shifted with an acidic smell, teasing her nose. She tried to decipher the smell, but came up blank.

“I feel something,” she said.

“Demon something?”

She shook her head. “It might be the key. I don’t know. It feels

weird."

"Okay. So, you think the demons were guarding the key but that it might be out here?"

"No. I really thought if they were guarding it, it'd be in there with them. So, feeling whatever this is? I really have no idea." And she was tired of being so dumb. "The key is a copper Celtic knot."

Brian stopped, his expression droll. "That's not a key."

"Which is why hiding it in the open would be ideal. No one would see it even if they were looking right at it. And it *is* a key. The key can be anything. It's just a focus point for magicks, and copper is ideal for holding magick since its raw form is very close to its worked form."

"Jesus."

She reached out with her mind, trying to feel anyone or anything in the area. Not that she would unless the person was a demon, but all was quiet.

Too quiet.

She stopped and shook her head. Calling the elements to her, she focused the power into her cupped hands.

The sphere appeared with a slight pop.

Brian glanced over at her, turned away, and then did a double take. "What is that?"

"My scry globe." She found herself. Easy enough. But she saw nothing else. She should have been able to see Grandma, Malika, a few of the other people with witch potential, maybe?

He came up to her and leaned in to see better. "I take it something's wrong."

She widened the search area, trying to figure out where the demons had disappeared to.

The globe from St. Francisville to New Roads, the next town over, was demon free. No magickal beings of any kind.

What the hell?

She banished the globe and scanned the old cemetery. “They’re gone, but not just out of here. They’re nowhere.” But so was everyone else? Had her scry globe just suddenly stopped working? No. It had led her here, so… no.

“That’s good.” Brian straightened. “Right? It could be over.”

“Without them taking Lucius? Without them powering the key and opening the gate? I doubt it. No. It means they’re hiding.” How could they hide from her? “Are there any other structures? You said something about a church. Where is it?”

“Honestly? I don’t know.” Brian spun in a slow circle, then shrugged.

“I want to find it. If they were here, so many of them, they were probably in a building. If not, I need to see where. Search for… um whatever. I need to know if they left a clue.”

“Trampled grass, broken twigs, footprints, that sort of thing. You big city folk have skills, but sometimes…” Brian shook his head. “Just look for things out of the ordinary.” He took off in one direction and pointed Paige to another.

She couldn’t say which way he went. She had no mountains to tell her which direction was west, and she wasn’t on streets she knew. She was lost. Great.

After searching for the better part of a half hour, her phone buzzed. Taking it from her back pocket, she checked it. Dexx. *Where are you?*

With a grimace, she Swyped back, *Looking for demons.* She didn’t bother stashing it back in her pocket. She paused in her meanderings as her phone vibrated again, then again, and again in quick succession.

Are you ducking kidding me? His phone was on auto-correct.

Give me your location.

I’m going to ducking kill you. You hear me? He must be really upset to miss that.

She grimaced and texted back, *I'm fine. They're gone.*

His reply was almost immediate, as if he'd sent it before she'd responded. *Call me.*

So she could get an ass-chewing for doing her job? Not likely.

Her phone vibrated again. Brian. *Found nothing. You?*

She scanned the area one last time. *No.*

Bring it in, he responded.

Sure. If she knew where she was.

She'd made it out of the small cemetery and into the surrounding woods. Nature amazed her. When humans deserted a place, the trees and grass and other things reclaimed it. No muss. No fuss. Just took it back.

She retraced her steps, the sun starting the darkening descent. She should have brought her flashlight but hadn't realized they'd be there this long. If she got truly lost, she'd use the flashlight app on her phone.

Dexx's text message vibrated in her hand. She ignored it, looking for landmarks to guide her back.

That's when she saw it.

A broken branch and what could have been a game trail leading off to the side. She hadn't seen it coming from the other direction. Her eyes never stopping, she took the path, following the broken branches and the flattened vegetation.

The trail spilled out into what had to have been the front lawn and rising out of the forest stood a good-sized stone church.

Her phone buzzed again. She hit the call button, Brian's name, and put the phone to her ear.

"Where are you?"

"Really couldn't say for sure, but I found the church."

"Is anyone there?"

It didn't look like it. She heard nothing but birds squawking all

around her. She saw no movement through the large busted windows. “No. I think it’s empty.”

“Is your GPS on?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. Give me a minute. I’m coming to you.” The call went silent.

She ignored Dexx’s text message and scanned the area in the dimming light. Nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary for a large, abandoned building. Not all empty buildings were haunted. She knew that. However, her experience with the girl ghost, Jessica, was still fresh in her mind. She waited for Brian to show.

Which he did surprisingly fast. “Dexx is pissed,” he said as he broke through the tree line. “He told us to wait for him.”

She shook her head and took a step toward the church.

Brian stopped her with a hand on her arm. “And since I don’t know how to expel a demon, after what I’ve seen these guys lay out for you? I’m in agreement. We wait.”

Chapter 33

It took Dexx a lot longer than Paige wanted to wait, though she couldn't disagree with them. She'd been to one crime scene and one unattached investigation. She'd been hit with a trap spell both times. Then, if that wasn't bad enough, she'd been abducted from her own room, tormented, and had a demon forced into her.

Yeah. She could use the support and the backup. Brian might not know how to handle himself in a fight with a demon, but Dexx did.

It did give her time to scope the place out. No movement. None. No graffiti. No signs of disturbance from the outside.

She called up her globe and searched again, hoping for a glitch. After all, she'd been possessed by a demon. Maybe that had jacked things up. She pulled the perimeter back. No one. It was like either all the magickal people on the continental U.S. were hiding under the same shield, or every single one of them had disappeared. She couldn't figure out which scared the crap out of her the most. She couldn't even find her grandmother, mother, or sister. She was always able to find them.

Dexx must have thought he traveled a bit cross-country. It really wasn't that bad, just dirt roads that could barely be considered roads anymore. Paige heard Jackie's rumble and a car door slam. She gritted her teeth as she played all the possible conversations that were about to ensue. They all started with, "What were you thinking?" and ended with, "Shut the fuck up."

Brian walked back to meet Dexx halfway. The sun slid behind the trees, casting long shadows over the gravestones.

Dexx had his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, his sawed-off shotgun in his right hand. His expression was tight, fixed. "I see you found their

lair."

"Maybe," Paige said, matching her gait to his as she turned and headed back toward the church. "Seems empty now."

"Then why are we here?"

"To see what the demons left behind. They were here for a reason. Was it the key? Is it here? Did they think it was here? Did they find it? Do they have it? Are they still looking for it?"

"That was a lot of questions."

She frowned at him. The shadows hid his expression at that angle.

He stretched his neck. "I just want to know if this is even worth the trip."

"There were a lot of demons here and now there are *none*."

"And there could be a trap in there." He stopped and hitched the bag on his shoulder. "What brought you here?"

"The scry globe."

Brian folded his arms over his chest, watching.

"And what did you see?" Dexx asked.

"In my room, I saw about a dozen demons in this area, but I couldn't pinpoint an exact place."

"Is that weird?"

"Kinda. Yeah." Though everything felt rusty to her now. "My globe has never lied before. Then, I tried while I was here, and I can't see anyone except for me."

"Not a single person."

She shook her head.

"Are there protections against magick here?"

If so, she wouldn't have been able to call her globe. She called the wind to play in her hair. "No." But what if being possessed by Lucius had affected her? What if her magick didn't work the same way anymore? But if that was the case, then why had she been able to see

demons not even an hour ago?

"That's weird."

"Yeah." Pale light from above, probably the moon, glinted in his eyes. They concentrated on her chest.

Paige touched the bandage. It seemed like days ago, but her abduction had been just mere hours earlier. Well, a bit longer than that, but still. Her wounds hadn't healed, but she didn't think much of them. "What is it?"

He shook his head and stomped toward the church.

Brian moved to follow. "I feel as though I missed something."

Dexx wasn't forthcoming with answers.

Paige was just as confused as Brian.

Reaching around his back, Dexx pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and turned it on with a loud click. The interior of the church was one large room. The bell tower reigned in the far back, rafters partially fallen, dangling dangerously. He scanned the roof.

"Looks a bit unstable," Brian commented.

Paige pulled out her phone and brought up the flashlight app. After a second or two, the light came on, bathing the area in a bright light. "I'm looking for anything other than dirt and leaves."

"Like?" Dexx asked, meandering toward the back.

"Like a clue as to where they are and what their next move is. The idea is to stop them before they kill someone else."

Brian pulled out a mini flashlight from his pocket and shined it around.

She hoped Sven had no idea they'd been able to expel Lucius from her body.

"Don't touch anything."

She glared at Dexx. Like she needed the reminder.

Brian headed toward one wall. "How's the shoulder?"

Paige ran the question through her mind, trying to recall what he was talking about, then remembered in a flash. Dexx. He'd been shot before she'd been kidnapped. How had she forgotten? Like the wounds carved into her flesh, his was still new, raw.

"Fine," Dexx said, shining his flashlight into the bell tower.

She studied the walls, which were bare. The dirt floor had no markings on it. A few footprints, but nothing to show over a dozen demons had been there. Maybe they hadn't been in the church.

"I'm not seeing anything." Dexx spun.

"Me either." Brian flopped one hand against his leg.

"This is so frustrating." Paige took in the scene one last time. "I know they were here." But if her scry globe wasn't working correctly, what had she seen? Demonic energy? Or… she didn't even know what.

"And you searched the area around the church?" Dexx asked.

"Yes." The only signs of…the broken branches, the smashed grass. Maybe she'd gone in the wrong direction. "I've got an idea."

Dexx and Brian followed her out of the church and into the woods. It took her a moment to find the path again. It had been difficult to see the first time. She wasn't a tracker, had never been taught. There it was again. A broken branch and blades of grass smashed outward.

"I see it." Dexx took the lead.

Dexx passed a point that might have been where she'd intersected the path. Maybe. Everything looked so different at this point. He kept going, tramping as quietly as he could.

Brian wasn't as light on his feet.

Dexx stopped suddenly, holding his arm out to stop Paige.

"What?" She stepped around him, then froze.

Brian followed suit, but went to the other side of Dexx.

Blood. Everywhere. And fresh.

"I don't see a body," Paige murmured.

“Me either.” Brian’s voice lowered, as if he were forcing his words around something lodged in his throat.

“How many people were in that coven?” Dexx asked.

“I didn’t ask.” She knelt and reached for a blade of grass.

“Don’t!” Dexx slapped her hand away, his duffle bag falling as he stooped. He straightened, rearranging the bag over his shoulder. “Don’t touch anything.”

Brian ran his free hand over his head. “I thought you said they were killing people to get Lucius to possess them.”

“I thought they might be. It made sense. Everything fit the puzzle.”

“Then why are they still killing?” he demanded, rounding on her. “That’s fresh blood. I don’t have to touch it to know. I can smell it.”

Also, there was the fact it hadn’t dried. Even in the not-great light, she could tell it gleamed. “Maybe it’s not human.”

“And maybe we have another body that’ll turn up at the shack tonight.”

Paige dug her elbow into her knee and stared at the bloodied grass. Why had they taken her to the cellar? She didn’t even know which cellar, only that it was one. And yet, all the other sacrifices had been conducted here. At least, that is what it looked like. Granted, it was a leap in logic. The evidence hadn’t been gathered, but there was a lot of blood here. Some old. Some new. It didn’t take a forensics team to see that. More than one body could carry. It splattered on the branches, the leaves, the vegetation—everything in a wide circle of more than six feet in diameter.

What was going on here? She scanned the area for clues, afraid to touch anything. Her Spidey senses told her nothing. Her gift didn’t register anything.

She was blind. Her scry globe didn’t work.

She was being played. Again.

Chapter 34

Dexx retrieved Jackie, bringing her closer to the church. He'd needed to stash his "tools." Brian made a call on his cell and within minutes—which might have been longer than that in reality—an unmarked car parked on what had once been a lonely gravel drive at the church behind Jackie.

Paige wanted to hurry to the crime scene and catch the killer in the act of dumping the body, but she knew that this scene needed to be secured. The shack had people stationed, waiting. She wasn't going to do anyone any favors by also scoping out the shack.

A tall, white man with a bit of a belly stepped out of his car. "Brian. I didn't think you'd call us in," he said with a soft Southern drawl mixed with something else that marked him as a native-born Louisianian.

"But you were in town, anyway?" Brian clasped the other man's hand.

"I thought I'd come by and see what was going on in person. See what all the commotion was about for myself."

Brian turned to Paige and Dexx, waving them over. "We have a case, and I have reason to believe some of my people are involved. It's a bad one with some… I'll call them non-standard murders."

Paige narrowed her eyes at him, trying to tell him to keep a few things to himself. "Detective Whiskey." She offered her hand.

"You're new," the other man said, taking it.

"Chief Jim Nolan, Detective Paige Whiskey," Brian introduced. "I called her in from Denver."

Chief Nolan's eyes widened.

Brian nodded in response. "This is Dexx Colt. He's a specialist who assists her in cases like this."

“Colt.” Jim nodded once, his eyes locked on Dexx. “I see. So, what kind of case do we have here?”

“Paranormal.”

Nolan rolled his eyes in the glare of the flashlights. “You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious. Someone thinks he’s raising demons, and from I’ve seen and *experienced* in the past couple of days, I think so too.”

“You haven’t drunk the Kool-Aid, have ya?”

“Of course not, but I’ve got people dropping all around me, Jim. People I knew. And the things this guy is doing to them, it’s beyond horrible.”

Jim Nolan took Brian’s shoulder and squeezed it. “Okay. So, what do you need me to do? See if I can’t ground the investigation a little.”

Brian gestured for Jim to follow and led them through the woods to the crime scene they’d discovered. “I need someone who isn’t on my team to gather evidence and process it.”

Bringing out his own flashlight, Jim scanned the scene, then reeled back. “What is that? Animal slaughter?”

“Like I said, people I knew. We’re pretty sure we found where they’re torturing their victims before killing them.” Brian joined his friend at the edge of the bloodstained grass.

Jim swiped at a tall blade of grass. “This is fresh.”

“And I know where the body’s going to be.”

“Brian.”

“I know.”

Paige stopped at the edge, trying to feel if she could determine anything else.

“So,” Jim said. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Detective, is this what you specialize in?”

Could she call it specializing if she had just reacquired her gift? “Yes.”

“What can you tell—”

Brian’s cell rang. He dug it out of his pocket. “White.” A frown flickered between his brows. “What? No. I’ll be right there.” He disconnected the call and headed for the cars.

“The body?”

He stopped and half-turned. “The body showed up in town.”

Shit. “They changed their MO.” Was it because they knew they were being watched at the shack, or was it because they didn’t care anymore? They had Paige. She was right here.

Brian paused and turned to his friend. “How soon can your people be here to process this scene?”

“Half hour at best.”

“Call them, but could you stay here to keep it secure? Dexx, you stay too.”

Paige moved to follow Brian.

“No.” Dexx grabbed her arm. “I’m going with you. You have no idea what they have planned.”

“I won’t touch anything.” She took a step closer, her arm brushing his chest. “If anything demony happens here, you have to handle it. You keep him safe so he can do his job.”

“What are we doing here, Pea?” he asked quietly. “We know who the killers are. Let’s just handle this.”

“Two of the killers are human.” She peered at his face in the dark, seeing only shadows. “They can and will be tried in a court of law. The demon, though? Sven? He’s mine. But I have to catch him, and I have no idea where he is.”

“I don’t like this.”

She didn’t either, but what choice did she have? Placing a hand on his chest, she pushed him out of the way. “We don’t have to like it, Dexx. We just have to deal with it.”

He didn't try to stop her as she left to follow Brian through the woods to his car.

Brian drove, taking the corners sharply, but he didn't say a word.

Paige couldn't blame him.

He drove them to the center of town. A median planted with lush, wild grass and flowers resided at the intersection, a lone light pole claiming dominance. Red and blue lights flashed, surrounding buildings reflecting the glare.

Tied to the light pole was a woman in a flowing floral gown.

Brian parked the car at the edge of a growing crowd of townsfolk and pushed his way to the front.

Paige followed in his wake.

Two local police officers worked to keep the crowds away.

Two? Where were the rest? Paige gestured to one of them. "Expand the perimeter. Give our people more room to work. Ladies and gentlemen, if you would all move back. There's nothing to see here. Go home."

They shouted questions at her, but she ignored them. Of course, there was something to look at. A dead body.

But the details. The details turned the body into a case. So, what did she have? Same killers? Different killers? If they were the same killers, how close was Paige to catching them?

She walked a slow spiral toward the victim, careful to touch nothing.

Brian handed her a set of blue gloves.

She slipped them on, continuing her slow spiral to the center. No symbols were carved into the body. No blood pooled, most likely because she'd been killed at the old church. The woman had been washed before she'd been propped up. No runes had been etched into the paint on the pole. Maybe this was a new killer. Could she be wrong about the change?

But what was the likelihood of that happening? Most people talked about killing someone, but when it actually boiled down to it, the little voice inside their head telling them not to do it became a very loud voice. Though, with this many demons in town —

As much as she hated to admit it, when demons were allowed to move freely without consequence, they really could be assholes.

"What's with all these shells?" Brian stooped and retrieved one from the ground, holding it out to her. "Don't touch it. Just look at it."

She retracted her gloved hand. Good idea. "That's a conch shell."

"They're all over here."

Paige shined her flashlight around. Sure enough, the ground was littered with tiny brown and white conch shells. She found something else sprinkled with them. Rune tiles. Every single tile she could read had the same rune on it. Love.

She straightened and reassessed the victim.

The killers had met their original agenda. They'd gotten her to St. Francisville, and she'd been possessed by Lucius, bringing him into this reality.

So what did that mean?

And why had they brought her to a different location to be carved on? Why had they taken everyone else to the other site? That was still an assumption, but a good one.

"Isn't that Malika's dress?" Brian asked. "I could have sworn I saw her wearing it earlier today."

Paige flicked her gaze at him, then returned it to the victim. Malika's dress? Conch shells that were used in love spells, and love runes scattered at the victim's feet? "What do you know about the victim?"

"Not much. St. Francisville is bigger than it seems. I don't know everyone."

"I'll start collecting evidence, Chief," one of the uniformed officers

said as he approached.

Brian waved him down. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll have New Roads handle this.”

A new officer joined them, tall, big, and burly. “What do you mean New Roads is going to handle this? Last I checked, this was still St. Francisville.”

“Yes.” Brian stepped out of the shrub. “And when I say we’re doing something a certain way, that’s what we’re doing. I have my reasons.”

“For invitin’ others onto our turf like we don’t know what the hell we’re doing?”

“Excuse me,” a tenor said. “Are we interrupting?”

Paige turned to the newcomers and groaned. FBI.

A woman and man team walked up, scanning the scene without lingering on any one thing.

The woman stood about as tall as Paige, pretty, but had the look as though she could be forward with things that really didn’t concern her.

The man was taller than Dexx but he seemed more introspective, and… timid? No, more like he was new to things.

Brian moved his officer out of the way and greeted the FBI agents. “Chief White. What can I do for you?”

The man lifted a shoulder, showing his badge. “We’re here to assist if you need. That’s all. Looks like you could use it.”

Brian glanced at the female.

She showed her badge as well.

Curious, Paige took the male’s badge and read it. “Jack Scott.”

“Special Agent Jennifer Forde,” the female said.

“It’s not like the FBI to come all the way out to a place like this to help,” Brian said.

Paige sighed. “You haven’t had too many opportunities to work with them, have you? As long as things are okay, this is exactly what they

do.”

Special Agent Scott raised his eyebrows. “Detective Whiskey. You’re actually the reason I wanted this case.”

“Really?”

He gave her a thin smile. “Really.”

Chapter 35

Chapter

3

5

Paige scrambled through her memories. Had she ever met Special Agent Scott before? She came up blank, but that didn't mean she hadn't.

"I've been following your cases for years," he said, stowing his badge. His attention was captured by the victim. "You're quite good at what you do."

"Then you haven't read many of my reports."

He smirked as he shambled toward their victim.

"What do you have here?" Special Agent Forde gestured to Brian. "Chief, do you mind if we take a look?"

Brian stepped back, the corners of his lips pulled down.

"That's just great," the beefy cop snorted. "First, you give our jobs to New Roads, and now you invite the FBI?"

"Please forgive him." Brian winced. "Duke, there's more here than I want to deal with. Yes, I'm giving them a shot, so either maintain the barrier, or go patrol."

Duke glared, his round face red, but he and his fellow officer went back to the perimeter.

Scott joined Forde at the body. "New Roads?"

Brian folded his arms over his chest, studying the victim.

"Why the doubts on your own team, Chief?" Scott asked.

"I have reason to believe that one of my own is one of the killers, and

I don't know how deep it goes."

"I didn't see any arrests had been made," Forde said, her dark hair glinting in the streetlight.

"He's still free."

"No evidence?" In the light, Agent Scott's eyes were dark, his features sharp and angular. Tall, slender, young. A pup.

"No. I had some, but…"

Paige frowned. She hadn't recalled anything.

"We had some blood and hair samples from two of the victims. The test report on the blood sample was messed up and the hair samples went missing."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Paige asked. That was huge. "And why wasn't this in the reports?"

"It's not something one brags about," Scott answered for him. "And it happens. People make mistakes."

"Maybe in a small town."

"Where do you think you are, Detective?"

He wasn't as much of a pup as she'd originally thought. "Why are you here again?"

"Just following your trail." He dropped to his knee and pushed the vegetation around with his pen. "Romance, huh?"

Really not a pup. Who was this guy? He moved with obvious practice, but he *felt new*. Who was he?

"Love runes and conch shells." Scott propped his elbow on his knee, his folded fist supporting his jaw. "You said you already knew one of the killers. Do you know more?"

Paige nodded once. "How'd you know about the runes?"

"I've done my homework."

"Reason?" So, she'd been investigated. There were less than a handful of reasons the FBI would investigate someone, and most weren't good.

“The heart-to-heart can wait.”

“Actually, no. It can’t.” Paige stepped up to Scott and tugged on the shoulder of his jacket until he rose on his own. The man towered over her. “You’re a stranger to me. You know too much about what’s going on. Runes, conchs, those are paranormal. I’ve got demons running around, and I think you already knew that.”

He didn’t flinch.

Hardened. Huh. “I don’t know who I can trust. You come in when we could really use you, which is convenient, too convenient, and you want me to trust you? Give me something, some reason why I should.”

He jutted his jaw forward for a moment, then nodded. “I have…” He lowered his voice and leaned in so no one else could hear. “I have premonitions. Visions.”

“Of?” she asked just as quietly. He knew what they did was sensitive. A point in his favor.

“Death.” He blinked, glancing at his partner and back at Paige. “I’ve found the strongest ones usually surround you. Paige Whiskey. I don’t know why. I saw all these victims die.”

She couldn’t scoff at him. The Whiskeys weren’t the only family with gifts. “Tell me something *not* in the files.”

“There’s another victim.” He dipped his head, his lips twisting in disdain. “At the caboose.”

Paige narrowed her eyes. “Details.” The flashing lights of the police cruisers cast sharpened features to his face.

“This one, her name is Stephanie Farsworth. She was crossing the street in front of a witch. I don’t know her name. Her partner—she called him Mike, I think. Or Mark, maybe. He mentioned her.” He flicked a finger at the corpse.

Paige licked her lips, a frown furrowing her brow.

Scott shifted to the side, putting his back to his partner. “Later, the

witch broke into the woman's home, slipped something in her tea, waited until she was dead, put her in one of her own dresses, and brought her out here. Then she sprinkled the conch shells and the runes around, said a chant of some sort, and left."

That's how he'd known about them. "And the other victim?"

"Male. Looks are very similar to Mike or Mark or whoever."

She almost corrected him, but stopped herself. She had to test him, see if he was playing with her. He could still be a part of the conspiracy. What could she use? Nothing immediately came to mind.

"Anyway. He could have picked his victim randomly, for all I could tell. He choked the man, then propped him against the caboose on the outskirts of town. He left a mirror, and a wreath made of wheat."

Mirror. Divination? Maybe. A wheat wreath? Power and life. What the hell was Jones trying to say with that? She glanced at Agent Forde, who watched them out of her peripheral. "Your partner doesn't know?"

He pulled back with a sigh and shook his head.

"Are you here officially?"

He shrugged. "Technically, you could use our help. We're here because it's a case of interest. If you made it official…"

"I'm here as an advisor. Out of jurisdiction." She could make it official with a quick word to Brian. Jack Scott couldn't be trusted one hundred percent, yet, but with big risks came big rewards.

She swallowed and walked to Brian, removing her gloves and dumping them on the ground. "According to the boy wonder, we'll have another victim at the caboose, either now or very soon."

Everyone knew the caboose. It guarded the welcome sign heading into town.

"How does he know about it?" he asked, giving the agent in question a good, hard stare.

"Premonition."

“Do we know for sure?”

She shook her head.

Brian nodded and pulled his phone out of his pocket as he walked away. “Wear your gloves and touch nothing. Paige. Do you understand me?”

“Yeah, Chief. I hear you.” Paige pulled her phone out and tapped on Dexx’s contact.

“Hey,” he answered.

“New bodies. How’s the crime scene?”

“Demon free, and very quiet.” Dexx sounded depressed.

“Good. I need you here.”

“Where?”

“Caboose.”

“Done.”

Before she could end the call, the red phone button disappeared. She touched Scott’s arm and gestured with her other hand to get Forde’s attention. “Can you stay here with the chief? We got word we might have another body outside town. I’d like to take Special Agent Scott with me.”

Forde gave her a long, pensive look, then passed it to Agent Scott. She nodded and turned her attention to the crime scene.

The thing that ate at Paige was the fact that the blood at the church had been fresh yet this body had been poisoned and, if Special Agent Jack Scott was to be believed, the other victim had been choked. So, where was the body missing all of its blood?

On the way out, Paige caught Brian’s eye and hooked her thumb at Forde.

Brian rolled his eyes, but nodded.

They’d made it through the small crowd when Paige remembered she didn’t have her car. “I don’t have a car here. I think I can get one from

the chief."

"Mine's right here. We can take it."

She raised her chin in acknowledgement, then climbed in. "Tell me about these visions of yours. When did they start?"

He turned the key. The car barely made a noise to show it was alive. He put the car in gear and turned it around. "Since my dad died."

She'd heard of gifts like that. "Did he have premonitions?"

"Not that he said, but there's a lot about him I never knew."

"Explain. Why did he keep secrets?"

He glanced at her, his lips tight.

"You want me to trust you?"

He pursed his lips and crept past the stop sign. "He left when I was three. So, there's a lot I don't know about him. Some stranger came to my apartment one day and told me he'd died. That's when I first saw them, the visions. You, actually, were the first person I saw."

She narrowed her eyes. "Me? I'm still alive."

"You were in a warehouse. A man appeared out of thin air in front of you. But behind you, someone slipped in through a door and killed a homeless guy watching you."

"What?"

He nodded. "I looked you up after that. I discovered the name of the guy who died. I even found the man who killed the homeless man. Everyone was dead within a month, the killer, the homeless man, the person the killer told. Dead people follow you around, Detective."

Shock stole her words. How could so many people be dying all around her without her not knowing a thing?

Special Agent Scott pulled the car around and parked in front of the red caboose. It was nestled within a large garden of flowers beside the welcome sign.

Propped up next to it, standing like a drunk resting, was a man.

“Got an extra set of gloves?”

“Yeah. Why’d the chief tell you not to touch anything?” He reached toward the back seat as she got out of the car.

She still didn’t know how far she could trust him.

His door shut quietly and walked around the front of the car, offering a set of gloves. “He sounded pretty adamant.”

She took the gloves he offered. “Local procedures.”

He raised his chin, his mouth open. He didn’t buy it.

She didn’t care. Trust was a sword not easily won. She needed to know if she could trust this agent and she didn’t have a lot of time to play. “Balnore, I need you.” She didn’t break step as she continued to the caboose, shining her flashlight ahead of her.

“Did you say something?” Scott asked over his shoulder.

“Nope.” She slipped the gloves on and stopped in front of the leaning man. “Sir?”

Scott touched the other man’s shoulder with a black-gloved hand. “He’s dead.”

“How can you tell?”

“He…feels dead.”

Paige stepped in closer and checked the man’s pulse. “You’re right.” She flicked her gaze at Scott. “No light.”

“Um.” His mouth opened, and he shrugged.

“Peanut, I’m in the middle of something.” Balnore’s voice came from behind them, close to the car.

Paige turned to the demon and frowned. “The wrong side of an interrogation?”

He flattened his lips. A cut bled across one eye and his cheek was swollen. His shirt was half untucked, his pant leg torn. “I need to get back.”

“Fine.” She took a step toward him. “I need you to tell me what you

know about this one."

Balnore took a staggering step backward. "Jack? He's clean, Peanut. You can trust him. Besides, you'll probably need him before this is over."

First-name basis? That meant Special Agent Scott was a person of interest. "What is he?"

"Human."

"A witch? What's his gift?"

Balnore dipped his chin and stared at her through his eyebrows. "He sees dead people die before they die. Now, can I go?"

She flicked her fingers and turned back to Jack Scott as Balnore disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

The agent raised his eyebrows. "You summoned a demon to vet me?"

She closed her eyes. "I've done it for worse."

And she had.

Chapter 36

Paige stepped back from the latest victim and looked at the tall man. “What?”

Special Agent Jack Scott rubbed his forehead. “Whatever. Are we good now? Can we work together?”

She shrugged. It still felt way too convenient, and “he sees dead people die” wasn’t much help. Balnore didn’t even faze him. Interesting.

“There’s the mirror I saw,” Scott said, pointing to the right. “And the wheat.”

Paige ran her tongue over her teeth and nodded. “They’re playing. Malika and Jones. They’re toying with us, having fun.”

“Ah, Malika is her name. The other must the Mike Jones? The lieutenant?”

Paige nodded.

“Well, bringing New Roads in makes more sense now. You haven’t caught them yet, so they’re getting cocky. They’ll slip up soon.”

“We don’t need them to slip up. I need *him* to slip up.”

“Him, who?”

Paige rubbed her eye and paced away. Sure, Balnore had told her Special Agent Jack Scott wasn’t bad, but that only meant he wasn’t evil. Maybe. Could she really trust Balnore anymore?

That was a tough question. The answer was always and never.

Headlights shone on them and a rumbling purr met Paige’s ears.

Dexx pulled Jackie next to Scott’s car and got out. “What do you have?”

Relief crept into Paige’s chest. Having Dexx there made things easier. She could trust Dexx. “Another body.”

He clicked on his flashlight and pointed it at the caboose.

Scott raised his hand to shield his eyes and stepped out of the glare.

“Who’s the fed?” Dexx asked.

“Special Agent Jack Scott.” Paige ran her hand over her face. “He sees people die. Balnore says he’s clean.”

Dexx narrowed his eyes at her, his expression pained.

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

He relaxed his brow and nodded once. “Details on the first body you found. It was left in town?”

“Malika apparently killed her. Put the woman in her own dress, then tied her to a light post in the middle of town.”

“Security cameras?”

That was the next thing to check for. With Malika on camera, they’d have arrestable evidence. “Possibly. We’ll have to see.”

“Small town.” Dexx shrugged.

“Hopefully not so small.”

“Witnesses?”

She shook her head and meandered toward the dead man.

Jack Scott stepped out of her way, watching them both with interest.

“Then how’d you get so many details already?”

She gestured to Scott. “He saw it in a vision.”

The special agent nodded

“You weren’t kidding,” Dexx said.

“And the details he had were solid.” Could Paige use this to her advantage? Where was the victim who’d been killed at the church? “I’d say he was in on it, but Balnore vouched for him.”

Scott ducked his head and chewed the inside of his cheek.

Could Paige trust Balnore? He’d trained her how to use her gift, and then he’d been okay with her gift being bound for years? Something didn’t add up. “Malika left love runes and conch shells on the ground at

her victim's feet. Some kind of message for Jones?"

"A love note?" Dexx's face contorted in an expression of revulsion. "That's… way beyond…"

"It's sick." Though, with these two, it was a real possibility.

"They've been killing people together for weeks. This is a little lame, don't you think?"

That wasn't the word she'd have used. "Then this guy. According to Special Agent Scott, Mike strangled him, then left him here with a mirror and a wreath of wheat."

Dexx's expression went flat. "Wheat? Are you fucking kidding me? First, a protection mandala and now a wreath of wheat."

"Just goes to show that the power is neutral until warped by the hands of the user."

"Wheat."

"I know."

Scott's eyes bounced between the two of them as they volleyed. "You two speak in a weird sort of half-language."

Paige shook her head and turned away from the body.

"We used complete sentences," Dexx said.

"No. You really didn't."

Dexx scrunched up his nose. "Really? I'm sure we did."

"No."

"As cute as both you boys are," Paige interrupted, "shut it." She rubbed her mouth. "There's probably evidence we can actually follow here. There might be fingerprints. DNA?"

"That's a good thing," Scott said.

"Kind of. The real target is Sven. Can I catch him easier if Malika and Mike are in jail? Or do I catch him if they're both free?"

Special Agent Scott stepped into her line of view. "You think these two murders are plants, so they get caught. That's not typical."

Paige hadn't quite thought of it that way, but it made sense. They'd been several steps in front of her during this entire investigation. This would be like thumbing their noses at her, reminding her she still didn't know what she needed to. "Sven's hiding. And my globe stops working now? No. Somehow, he knows the only way I can find him is through those two."

"Who is Sven?"

Dexx walked to Jackie and propped himself against her hood. "A demon, and a pretty bad one at that."

Scott stretched his neck. "A demon I believe. A demon hierarchy that makes one worse than another, not as much."

Raising his chin, Dexx pursed his lips and folded his arms over his chest. "This is too weird, Pea. First the chief. Now a fed."

While she had to agree… "May I remind you who brought Brian in?"

He quirked his lips and flicked his eyebrows.

Scott looked at Paige. "If Sven is a demon, then summon him and we kill him on our terms."

Would that work?

Dexx unfolded his arms and thumped Jackie's hood. "That's a good point. Why go through all this if you can just summon him?"

Summoning someone like him now? It was too soon. She still felt raw from Lucius's possession. "He's too powerful. I just got my gifts back. Yes. I can summon demons I've summoned before. Balnore, for example. But more than that? I'd have to know his true name."

"How would you find that?" Scott asked.

Dexx shrugged. "I have books and books with demon names."

"No." She stared at the stars blinking out overhead. "Those are just letters and sounds. A true name is so much more. It's a twinge in the gut. It's a twist in the heart. It's a collage of images."

"So when someone without your ability creates the circle," Dexx said,

gesturing with his hands as if recreating the act, “and goes through all the pomp and circumstance—”

“A demon isn’t forced to come when someone summons like that.” Paige propped her foot on Jackie’s bumper. “The salt circle is to protect the summoner, but the real protections have to do with names; the true name of a wall, the true name of a door.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“And your gift,” Scott said, “comes with understanding these names.”

“Kind of. I guess. I hear walls speak. I experience memories, watch them play. It’s like being able to see beyond the veil of time, to see all the timelines together. But it’s more like you said. I have an understanding.”

Dexx’s face screwed up in confusion. “How does that help you find a name?”

“The name of a location, of a wall, of a door, is the culmination of all those memories, all those voices, all the people who left their mark.”

“Hmm.” Dexx glanced at the victim still tied to the caboose behind Paige. “So, how do you get a demon’s true name?”

“Research them. Pull up all their information. Collect their details.”

“So do that.”

“Sven died, Dexx. His paper doesn’t exist.”

Scott pulled his head back. “Demons die?”

“Like anyone else. He died a long time ago and no one’s heard from him since. He could have been born again as a human or as a bear or as a tree.”

“Now you’re pulling my leg.”

“I wish I were.” This was well above Paige’s understanding. She’d never even asked many questions about this. She’d never had to. “Demons are souls. Angels are souls. When they die, they go back into

the same soup we all do."

"So no matter what you believe, you're going to be reborn."

Paige shrugged. "It'd be an awful waste of energy, don't you think?"

Dexx released a puff of breath and glanced at the bandage on her chest. "How are you feeling, anyway? It's been less than a day since you were abducted and possessed."

"I'm fine."

"Are you? What about when you're around demons?"

"I'm fine." And she was, surprisingly. She'd always been a quick healer, but this was a new feat for her. She'd had symbols carved into her. She'd been beaten and drugged, and she was just a little sore.

"Okay. So, what's the plan?"

Paige scratched an itch at her temple, the sun piercing the night with delicate swords of light. "This is big and getting bigger."

"We can't allow Malika and Mike to go free," Scott said fiercely. "We need to catch them."

"I hear you." But they had bigger fish to catch. "We'll gather the evidence first and then review it."

"We already know who did this."

"And if it were just us, that would be enough. You with your visions. Me with my demons. But this is a big scene in a little town right now, Special Agent Scott. I don't know how you do things, but with me, when humans are involved, we let the law handle them."

He gnashed his teeth.

"This is the first time you've worked with someone who didn't think you were crazy, isn't it?"

He pulled his lips back, then settled them in place in a relaxed expression. "Yes."

She'd seen it before, mostly with "psychics" who couldn't tell a stick from a tree. When they tripped onto people who didn't immediately

assume insanity, they latched on, felt the rules no longer applied. “If the evidence points to Jones and Malika, we bring them in. We try them on the evidence they present.”

“And everything else we know?”

“We use *that* to guide us to the evidence they wouldn’t otherwise have provided.”

Scott dropped his gaze to the ground and released a frustrated breath.

“It’s not fun. Especially when we know what’s going on.”

“I’ve seen you bring people in with no evidence at all.”

And she had.

“So let’s bring them in now. Get them in custody while we’re processing the evidence.”

“Then how do we find Sven?” Dexx asked.

Scott raked his teeth over his bottom lip and turned to the victim behind him. “That man had a name. He had a family. He had friends.”

A wave of guilt and regret washed over Paige like a bucket of acid. “He’s one man.”

“And the woman from earlier?”

“Is one woman.”

“And the three they killed before?”

“Were three more.”

Scott shot daggers from his gaze.

It was time to share with the fed what the real issue was. “Sven is after a key that opens the Gate to Hell. It’s in three pieces. We have no idea how many pieces he has. We have no idea if it is working. We only know he has been successful in opening the Gg

ate for a short period of time. Things got loose. Things got *free*.”

Scott’s eyes widened.

Finally, she had his attention. “If he gets his hands on all three parts of the key and then uses it? Imagine how many thousands, how many

hundreds of thousands, millions, billions of lives will be affected then. Demons running around loose. Damned souls. Angels. Worse."

"What could be worse?" he asked, his voice low.

"You don't want to know." And neither did she. She didn't know what could be worse. She'd never faced it before. It could be Satan. It could Jesus. Hell, it could be God. Who knew? One thing she did know.

That gate had to remain closed at all costs.

Five bodies was a small price to pay.

Chapter 37

They spent the better part of the morning collecting evidence from the three scenes. Brian eventually allowed three of his officers to assist, but Duke wasn't one of them. He remained conspicuously absent.

Paige should have asked why, but she didn't care. She did, sort of. Too many other things, bigger things, were more important at the moment.

Dexx closed the door behind them, dropping his keys on the table next to the door.

"How are we going to catch Sven?" Paige asked, kicking off her boots.

"We'll figure that out in the morning."

"It is morning."

"Your clock is drunk, Pea. It's seven o'clock. You've been possessed. I've been up for two days. The two hours I slept before discovering you'd disappeared don't count because the freak-out nullified any sleep I got. We need rest."

She sank onto the edge of the bed. Her mind fought to remain awake, alert. People were dying. It could get much, much worse. She didn't want to close her eyes, to delve into her subconscious.

Her mouth fell open in a huge yawn that kept going and going and… when it finally released her, all her energy to remain awake evaporated, and the only thing she could think about was going to sleep.

Dexx gave her a tired nod, his eyes half open. "Pea, let me sleep in the bed. I'm begging you."

She was too tired for anything to happen, and she trusted that man with her life. She nodded. "Just don't snore in my ear."

He took off his green button-up—that hadn't even been buttoned—

and shucked his pants, leaving him only in his blue briefs, green T-shirt, and socks. He fell into bed on the other side and covered his eyes with his arm. “I make no promises.”

“Will the protections hold?” She flopped an arm at the Sharpie marks on the doorjamb.

He reached under his pillow and pulled out a gun. “If not, this’ll slow ’em down.”

There wasn’t much else she could do. She shuffled to the window and drew the curtains closed, then hobbled to the door, slipped the chain, checked the deadbolt, and shoved a chair under the doorknob. Feeling mildly secure, she thought about it for two long seconds, then removed her pants, slid off her socks, and reveled in the freedom of having no bra.

With the warm comfort of Dexx lying beside her, she was asleep before her head did more than kiss the pillow.

She woke to Dexx breathing softly in her ear. His arm was thrown over her midriff, one leg nestled between her own. Her bladder screamed at her to get up. To move. To find relief.

Paige toyed with the idea of staying up as the toilet flushed, reviewing the case files again, trying to get a feel for Sven and who he was. But Dexx had been right. She was beat. The past few days had really taken it out of her. She returned to bed, wondering when she was going to get the call about the third body. Dexx curled around her as though she’d never left, holding her tight, surrounding her in warmth.

When she woke again, light streamed through the cracks in the heavy curtains. The shower played a song to her bladder she couldn’t ignore. They’d never been intimate, and to walk in while he was showering to take a piss? Not happening.

As soon as the water stopped and the door opened, she plowed past him, shoved him out of the door, and took complete advantage of the

room.

He was dressed and writing down notes when she emerged, showered and a great deal better. He grabbed her wrist and tugged her into the chair next to him. “Let me check your wounds.”

She sighed and let him. She hadn’t removed the bandages, and they were more than a little damp. She should have removed them, probably, or attempted to protect them from water, but there’d been a lot of not-caring involved in her shower. A blatant disregard for caring, actually.

The bandage on her chest peeled away easily. He froze, his brow furrowed.

She glanced down with a slight belch. The only thing that remained of the mark carved into her flesh was a slight pink scar. “I heal fast.”

“That fast?”

No. “Yeah. I guess.”

“Hmm.”

“What about yours?” She reached for his shoulder.

He kept it out of arm's reach. “I just dressed it. It’s fine.”

“You’re a baby.”

He shot her an angelic expression. “Yes. I am. I’m going to check in with Brian. You stay here behind the protections. I won’t be gone long.”

He was also moving around rather well, so maybe he was a fast healer, too. “Fine.”

Stopping at the door, he sighed. “Take care, and please, for everyone’s sake, *don’t* open the door if it isn’t me.”

She shot him a withering glare as he backed out the door that only made his stupid goofy grin all the more irritating as he closed it slowly, far too slowly.

Once Dexx and his too stupid face had gone, it was time to figure out what she could piece together on Sven.

His mark, his calling card, had to be on the victims. Malika and Jones

were his puppets. Not to say they couldn't come up with a few details on their own. Jones didn't seem like the kind of guy who followed blindly without bucking the system a bit here and there, but the Gate of Hell? He wasn't that kind of genius.

What did Sven want with the gate open? That question could lead to a considerable part of his name. What was the endgame? What could arise from having the gate opened?

Demons would flood through. They'd wreak havoc on the world of mankind, have all kinds of fun at man's expense.

Payback on God for casting them out of heaven, maybe? That seemed a bit farfetched, but everything from the Bible did. After all, it claimed the world had been made in seven days. Seven. Days. And depending on which version of the Bible one worshiped from, whether or not Jesus was a man or a god. All very confusing. Whatever.

So, what if this was more like a personal vendetta?

Against who?

How about the person who'd killed him almost two hundred years ago?

Two hundred years ago.

Hadn't Lucius been killed around that same time?

"We need to talk."

Paige nearly jumped out of her skin as she spun toward the open door of her room. "Bal, it's good to see you, too."

He sighed and leaned against the door. He looked a lot better than he had the last time she'd seen him. His face was healed. His violet button-up shirt was immaculately tucked into his grey slacks.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"No."

"Okay. Well, at least close the door so Fanny isn't eavesdropping." She headed toward the door.

Balnore backed away from her, his hands raised.

"What's going on?" She stopped as her stomach twisted. Something had been off with him ever since he'd helped extract Lucius.

"We have a problem."

Paige pursed her lips, trying to buy time. Time for what, she didn't know. She had a feeling, though, that she wasn't going to like what he had to say. "Tell me something I didn't already know."

"You're an open wound."

"You're looking good too, Bal." She knew something was wrong. She could feel it in her blood, as if it were boiling in her veins the closer he got to her. But she didn't want to admit what it could be. She had a guess. A scary one. "Is it your hair? I bet it is. You did something different. No, wait. It's your face. You did something different with your face."

"Every time you get close, I am—" He stopped.

She raised her eyebrows. "If you're trying to tell me you're secretly attracted to me, let me say that I see you more of a father figure and that's just gross."

He winced. "No. I—we're being sucked into you."

She narrowed her eyes. "Come again?"

"It's hard to control. Demons need to possess you."

"That's—" She crossed her arms over her chest and took a step back. "No. That's gross. You have your own body. Keep it."

"I know," he said, his arms open. "That's what I'm trying to say. Whatever they did to you, it's working with your gift somehow and it's…" His voice trailed off as he looked away. "You need to stay away from demons. Don't summon. Don't banish. Just stay away."

"I don't understand. You rode back with us. I was right there in the same car with you. It's been two days. This is the first time you thought to mention that the demon summoner can't summon demons?"

“I don’t understand it myself. Lucious noticed it first, and I just thought it was because of how he’d been pulled to you and that you’d just been exorcised. Of course, no demon would want to be in your body after something like that.”

“Seriously?”

He raised his eyebrows. “But it was better then. I don’t know. You’re —you’re more powerful now.”

“This is great. Just great. I have a town full of demons and no way to send them back.”

Balnore shrugged. “They’re not all demons.”

Paige closed her eyes, knowing where he was going. “How many are angels?”

“About half.”

A black hole of ah-shit entered her stomach. “How did they get through? They can’t use the same door you guys can. They don’t have a direct link to the soul.”

“Some of them do.”

“That’s scary.”

Balnore looked up at the ceiling. “I think some got through when the gate was open.”

“When that scary girl-bitch ghost came through?”

He nodded.

“That’s awesome.”

Licking his lips, Balnore shot her a look of expectation. “We’re going to have to figure something out. It’s my job to protect you and I can’t do that if I have to stay away.”

Yeah. Well, neither could she.

Chapter 38

Paige knew she should tell Dexx. She'd just gotten her powers back, and now she was broken? How was it even possible to break a demon summoner?

Somehow Sven had figured out how to do it.

What was his endgame? Why did he need to break her? What did he intend to do? If he needed her to open the gate or to power the key to bring demons over, she couldn't do that if they were all desperate to possess her. That was just…dumb.

Or maybe she was looking at it all wrong. Perhaps he simply needed her out of the way.

Out of the way for what?

That question terrified her.

Her phone buzzed on the table. She picked it up. "Whiskey."

"White. Er, Brian. We have a new body."

"The one from the church?"

"Looks like. You want to come down on your own, or should I send Dexx to come get you?"

"Is he with you?"

"Yeah."

She didn't need to know why. She stood and searched for her boots. "I'm on my way. Location?"

"Afton Villa Gardens. Plug that into your phone. I'm sure it'll come up. If not, call me. I'll guide you in."

She knew where the gardens were. All the websites for the area promoted them. She'd decided that if she'd had a spare three minutes, she'd go as a tourist. It appeared someone had been listening to her. So,

why not leave a body in the garden?

Grabbing her keys, she hurried out the door and down the stairs. The gardens were a short drive along the highway. She pulled off the paved road and passed through the metal and stone gate. Old oaks studded either side, Spanish moss dangling from the branches. The driveway continued for another half mile or so, then spilled out into a courtyard with four statues of what might have been Greek gods. Two males. Two females.

Amazing how women of that era were strong and revered enough to have statues made of them. When did that thought process change?

With the arrival of the Bible?

That wasn't a very Wiccan thought. It was probably a good thing she wasn't Wiccan, or she'd just be a jackass.

She parked behind Jackie and two other unmarked cars and followed the sounds of talking. Past the statues stood the jagged remains of the villa the gardens had been named after.

Dexx looked up and broke away from the group of cops. "Have a hard time finding this place?"

"Nope. What do we have?"

He raised his eyebrows. "A new body."

"Any clues left around the vic?"

"Well, no." He shook his head and led the way around the cops, behind one of the crumbling walls. Pulling back several branches of a trailing vine, he revealed the victim.

A bright haze blinded her for a moment, emanating from beneath him. Squinting, she stooped to see under his arm. Symbols and lettering flowed in a burning fire, moving like fast-flowing lava. There wasn't a single symbol she recognized, but words entered her mind in her own voice.

Somewhere I have never traveled, gladly beyond any experience, your eyes

have their silence: in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me, or which I cannot touch because they are too near.

E. E. Cummings? Why would she know that? She'd never been a fan of poetry.

The fiery letters shifted, changed, morphing again, her own voice translating the words flowing along the corpse.

One day, you will understand. We complete one another. You will be mine and I will be yours.

Until that day, Paige, be well. I will protect you as only I can.

Paige took in a sharp breath. What…the fuck?

Dexx turned toward her and only then she realized he'd been talking to her.

He narrowed his eyes and swung his head back and forth between Paige and the dead man. "What just happened here?"

She stared at the body, but it was now only a body. No writing. No words. Her internal voice remained quiet. "Nothing?"

"Liar. What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"You know who I am, right?"

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, then reopened them, studying the body. Male. Mid-thirties, maybe. Good-looking. Clothes were in good condition. He did appear to be desiccated, though. This had to be the body from the church, but why the poem? "There was a message for me."

Dexx's eyebrows shot up.

"Did you see anything when we came through?"

"Just now?"

She nodded.

"No. Obviously the dead guy, but nothing out of the ordinary."

A magical poem no one else saw or heard. That… wasn't interesting at

all. “How’d we discover this one?”

“Groundskeeper called it in.”

She blinked and raised her face to the brilliant blue sky. What was going on here?

“What did you see? What was the message? Wait. What *kind* of message? Magickal? Demony?”

She nodded again.

“Which question are you answering?”

“The last one. Or two. I don’t remember. I saw letters, a kind I’ve never seen before. Then, something in my head translated them. I don’t know how. Maybe they were in the language of demons? Perhaps that’s something I can read? I don’t know.”

“And the note said?”

She ducked her head and looked at him through her eyelashes. “It was a love letter. He started off with poetry. All I remember is that it was E.E. Cummings, but now I don’t even recall how I remember that. I’m not a fan of poetry anyway, and that one’s not ringing any bells for me.”

Dexx dropped the foliage and crossed his arms over his chest. “Poetry.”

“And then he went on to say that I’d understand one day. That he and I were meant to be together, and that he’d protect me as only he could.”

“Bullshit.”

She shrugged.

He pulled the vines away again. They drooped in place. “Is the note still there?”

She shook her head. “We got a name?”

“Yeah. Joseph Watanabe. Ring any bells?” Dexx peered closer at the body, staying clear of anything that might disturb evidence.

“No, but it could help later. I’m guessing we don’t have a clear motive either.”

“Nope. This guy flew under the radar. He’s… just a guy.”

“Did he have a rise in luck? A crash in luck?”

Dexx shook his head. “Not this one.”

“I don’t see much to gather here.” She gestured at the hedge looming over Joseph. “I’m pretty sure we’ll find that it’s his blood at the church.”

“Maybe we can get some trace evidence or whatever off the body.”

Paige looked at him, confused. That wasn’t a statement she’d ever thought she’d hear coming from his mouth.

“What? I listen. Sometimes.”

She shook her head. “It was magickal. There won’t be any trace evidence.”

He dropped his chin to his chest. “What’s going on here?”

Paige knelt, reviewing the scene in more detail. Who would put a love spell on a body like this?

A slight crack reach her ears, but she wasn’t sure from where. Looking around, she tried to figure out what was breaking.

Pattering rose in pitch as if a large number of… things were trying to break free of something, but Paige couldn’t determine what those things were or where they were trying to leave from.

The victim’s abdomen split open with a dusty crack, startling her with the sudden movement, and a swarm of dazzlingly blue swallowtail butterflies shot into the air.

Paige fell back slightly, raising her hand to cover her face.

Dexx reeled out of the way. “Whoa!”

First a love poem and now this? Paige reached out with one hand, feeling with her gift to see if she could find some clue, some reason as to why this man had been chosen to carry the message.

Fiery letters appeared on the man’s chest for a brief moment. *For you.*

A branch broke directly behind her.

Paige spun and swung.

Special Agent Scott parried her attack and took a step back. “What happened?”

Dexx walked into Paige’s line of sight and studied her. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” No. Not even a little bit. This was the creepiest love freaking letter she’d ever freaking seen in her entire freaking life. No. She was not freaking okay. Fuck.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Fuck. Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck. No. Fucking no. Goddamnit. Fuck. Shit.

She breathed, taking a step away.

No. Fuck.

“Hey,” Scott said. “What happened?”

Dexx paced away two steps, turned, his fingers interlaced on his head, and paced back. “Sven, the murdering scum we can’t seem to catch, is leaving her *love notes*.”

Scott blinked. “Where?”

“On the body.”

“Evidence?”

“Magick.”

Scott licked his lips and glanced at the body behind Paige. “What kind of love notes?”

“Poetry.” Dexx threw his arms down. “Pea, come on. We have got to get you out of here. You’re going home. Right now.”

She was ready. Good grief, she was ready, but she couldn’t. “Not without the key.”

“Right.” Dexx sounded so disgusted. “And what are you going to do with that?”

“Keep it safe.” From this guy? They were going to do great things together? Goddamnit. “I have to.”

“How?”

Frustration ripped through her. “I don’t know, but I’ll find a way. I always do.”

“No, you don’t!” Dexx spun, rubbing his eyes with one hand. He turned back to her. “No. You don’t. You’re in over your head.”

“Do you have enough to summon him?” Scott asked. “Even if you didn’t have his true name, if he’s leaving you love notes, wouldn’t that mean he wants to come?”

“Interesting concept,” Paige said, dread filling her chest. “Except I can’t summon.”

Dexx frowned at her. “I don’t think I heard you, right.?”

“I saw you summon yesterday,” Scott said. “You seemed to do it quite well.”

“You’re right. I’m fine.” She placed her fingertips on the scar on her chest. “I’m open to possession. As soon as a demon comes close, he *will* possess me.”

“But—” Dexx shook his head. “No. You were in the car with Lucius and Balnore. Neither of them possessed you.”

“Apparently, I’m getting stronger and so is the need to take over my body.”

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Paige agreed. “But it doesn’t matter. Sven needed Lucius. I brought Lucius back. We need to talk to Lucius and see what happened two hundred years ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, they disappeared at the same time. We may have figured out where this plan hatched from. Where’s Lucius?”

Scott pursed his lips.

Dexx shoved his hands in his pockets. “In a demon trap in jail.”

“What?” Paige nearly fell over.

“Yeah. Never seen anything like it. Lucius and Balnore strolled in, let me set the trap, and Balnore left. Crazy, I know.”

Paige pressed her thumb to the side of her nose and closed her eyes for a second. “Great. It means he’s protected. Let’s go. I have some questions to ask.”

Chapter 39

Chapter

39

Dexx hadn't been kidding. Lucius sat in a jail cell with demon traps surrounding him on the floor, on the ceiling. Demon traps littered the bars.

Paige released a breath but didn't enter. "Do you feel the need to possess me?"

He raised his bald, tattooed head. "No."

"Why not?"

"It's likely because I'm a bit different from the rest, love. I take it someone's had the talk with you, gave you the skinny?"

"Balnore said you're the one who noticed it first."

"Balnore says a lot of things." Lucius smiled tightly and widened his eyes before relaxing again.

Dexx blinked, his chin jutted. "Why not, Lucius? How are you different?"

"Does it matter?"

"If we're going to figure out how our new world works? Yes. Now, talk. Luce, why not you?"

The demon lifted one shoulder. "Because I'm not like the rest? How would I know?"

"Do you know anything about why my globe's not working?"

"The summoner's sphere." He leaned against the gray-painted concrete block wall, his hand splayed on his legs. "Probably for the same reason you can't control the demons, why they want to possess

you.”

Paige fingered the scar along her chest.

“Yup. That right there, love. It’s all it takes.”

“It’s a scar.” But Dexx made effective demon repelling marking with permanent marker.

“That goes straight to the bone.” He made a twisting motion with his hand. “I don’t know what the plan here is, but it looks bollucksed from this end. We need to do something before…”

“Before what?”

“Before another demon, not nearly as nice as I am, takes over your body and uses that gift of yours.”

“To what?”

“To summon demons? Come on now. I was rough, rougher than I wanted, but I didn’t scramble your mind that much.”

“No. I mean, why? Why summon them? What do they gain? What does Sven gain?”

Lucius pursed his lips, his black gaze unfocused.

“What happened two hundred years ago? How did you both disappear?”

“I don’t remember much.” He winced.

Maybe it was the wince, or maybe it was the pained expression that followed. She didn’t believe him. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. It’s none of your business.”

“Will it help me keep the gate closed?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. It’s my charge to keep it closed. You can kick up your feet, love. I’m here now.”

“And you’re capable of doing that this time?”

“Now that I have my own body? Sure. Locked and cinched.”

She didn’t believe that either. “How’d they get the drop on you the last time?”

“The witch used earth magick. Won’t be able to hold me this time. Trust me, love. I have this handled.”

“Really? Dexx isn’t a witch, isn’t a sorcerer, nothing. He was able to trap you using earth magick. So what’s keeping you from being bound this time?”

Lucius let out a long breath, then stood. Between one blink and the next, he’d left his cell and stood beside her.

Paige frowned at the traps laid in the cell.

Dexx jerked in surprise. “Luce, how’d you—that’s not—what the fuck?” His head swiveled furiously from the demon to cell and back.

“I said before, love,” Lucius murmured in her ear, “I won’t be held by your earthen magick again.”

“How?” she asked in a mere whisper.

“You gave me your magicks, showed me how they worked when you gave me a body. This isn’t just a vessel. This is a body you created using the power of the earth, the wind, the water, the bloody fire. You did this, infused me with it. I stand on equal footing with Sven.”

“And you stayed in the cell of your own volition? Why?”

“To see the look on his face.” The tattooed demon grinned. “Really, it was worth it, wasn’t it, Duh?”

Paige took a step toward the bars, peering inside. “What happened two hundred years ago?”

“Asking the same question won’t elicit a different response. I said it wasn’t your business, and I meant that. Sincerely. Now, then, if you don’t mind, I have places to be.”

“Lucius.” She empowered his name with her will. “You will stay.”

He swiped his hand, clearing the air. “No. Actually, I won’t. You see, it’s not only the fact you’re broken. You’d probably be able to control other demons. But me?” He shook his head. “Not me. You created me with your will. I am you, in a sense.”

With her gifts? What had she done when she'd released him from her body? How had she managed it?

"I don't know how, and no, I don't have your gifts."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"Because, love"—he bared his teeth—"you were thinking with your face. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really do have to be off." He headed down the hall.

"Where are you going?"

"To find my brethren. I need to know where they hide. They were not destroyed, for if they were, they would be reborn."

"Lucius!"

He disappeared in a cloud of smoke that seemed to darken the room for an instant.

Dexx pursed his lips, pointing his finger in the direction the demon had disappeared to. "What just happened?"

"I'm losing my touch." She spun on her heel and walked into the main room of the precinct. Maneuvering around desks, she entered the conference room. Low bookshelves and file cabinets cluttered the space, leaving little room for the long table and hard-backed chairs.

Special Agent Scott stared at the whiteboard, reviewing a few of his notes. He looked up, his thumbnail between his teeth. "What did you find out?"

"Nothing." Paige perched on the end of the table, her arms crossed. "Not a damn thing. Except that he doesn't follow my command."

"Why not?"

"Because, of course, he's a *different kind of demon*," she sneered. "Of *course* he'd have to be."

"Are you sure?"

She didn't know anything anymore. What was she even doing there? Gods! "Pretty sure. Yeah. He just blew through my command to stay

and, like an angsty teen, left in a huff."

"Hmm. Well, maybe you have to command him differently?"

"Yeah," Dexx said, joining her on the edge of the table. "Maybe command him with an accent and call him 'love.' I bet he'd like that."

"No." Her heart raced. Everything was so out of control. "I need to think of something else. He changed because of my magick. I don't know. Anyway. Evidence. Were we able to process anything?"

"A lot of it's still in the lab, but we were able to—"

Voices in the main lobby caught her attention. "Hey! You can't go back there. You aren't allowed."

Paige stood and headed for the door. "What's going on out here?"

An officer stepped aside.

Paige froze.

Eddie Lopez, victim number three, stood in the doorway, a confused frown on his face. "Can someone tell me where I could find my car?"

"What the hell?" Dexx stopped next to her. "Get back Pea. Don't know what he's sellin', but I ain't buyin'it."

Jack didn't move from the whiteboard, but he didn't sound overly concerned about it, either. "He's still dead. He's dark to me."

"Is… he dangerous?" Paige took a step back, her hand going to her gun. Would that even work on the walking dead?

"I have no idea." Jack shrugged as though he had no idea what to do, either. "I suppose he's as dangerous as any *living* person is. He's dark to me. Still, I don't think you should… *play* with it—him."

"Pea," Dexx called, "get back. How do we deal with this? Silver? I know you shouldn't let it bite you, and you have to protect your brain."

Eddie the zombie stood there patiently. His eyes went to Dexx, his brow furrowed with confusion.

Walking dead people was way beyond her scope of experience, but it didn't look like it wanted to eat anyone's brains, whatever Dexx thought

it might do. “It never rains…” She walked to Eddie but out of arm’s reach. What the fuck had Sven done now? Would the crazy never stop? “Mr. Lopez, hello. How are you feeling today?”

“Fine. Why? Except I can’t find my car. I don’t know where I parked the car.”

Dexx chuckled as his hand went into his pocket, then came out, something concealed within.

Paige kept between them and Eddie. “How’s your day been so far?”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on?” He idly scratched at his arm.

“Humor me for a moment? What did you do so far today?”

“I don’t know you.” His finger half pointed at Paige. “Duke, did you hire someone new?” His hand went back to scratching.

Paige kept herself in the center of his attention. “I’m Detective Paige Whiskey. I came in to consult on a case. If you could answer, I think I can fill in a lot of blanks. Then, we’ll go look for your car. Sound like a plan?”

Eddie narrowed his brown, too alert, dead eyes. “I just got back from the game.”

“What game?”

He turned to Duke for a moment, then back to Paige. “The softball game. Went to watch my nieces. Twins.”

“Oh. Did they win?” She sucked at interrogating dead murder victims. Maybe she should have called Leslie in after all.

“No, but softball isn’t about winning or losing. It’s about playing.” His hand went to his ear, scratched there, then back to his arm.

Every twitch, every flicker of expression seemed genuine. What the hell? “What else do you remember?”

“Going to the store before going home. Why? What’s this about? I… I’m just looking for my car.”

“Just trying to fill in a few blanks. You’re doing great. Only a few

more, then we can find your car. Did you make it home?"

"I think so?"

"Great. You went home. I'm assuming you went to bed. Where did you wake up?"

"In my bed. No. No. I woke up in a cold—no. I definitely woke up in bed. Why are you asking these questions?"

"It'll help me with the investigation. I sometimes help find missing property. When did you wake up in your bed?"

"This morning. Would someone tell me what's going on here? Why would waking up help you find my car? Can't you put out the APB?" His hand scratched harder at the spot on his arm.

His timeline wasn't jibing. Did he even realize that? She decided to go for the gusto. Sven had to have raised him for a reason. "After the game, but before you woke up, do you remember being kidnapped, tortured, maybe?"

He started to shake his head, then stopped, his gaze dimming for a moment. The *X*s carved into his eyelids flashed a burning orange for a fleeting moment.

"Where did you wake up, Eddie?" Dexx asked, stepping closer to the man.

"In the… morgue. I woke up in the morgue." His look went confused. Like his memories clashed. Which of course they were. "Why did I"—his voice dropped to a whisper— "wake up in the morgue?"

"How did you get here?" Paige asked.

"I—" His hand stopped scratching, but his finger poked hard to his flesh. He closed his eyes, then reopened them. "I hit the doctor in the head. Then I searched for clothes. These aren't—these aren't my clothes."

They didn't fit, with the mismatched tight shirt and pants that barely clung to his waist, but that didn't matter. Not these days. Paige couldn't

judge a person by the clothes they wore. “Why are you here?”

“For my… car.”

“When we find it, what are you going to do?”

“Go home. Kill Malika. Kill Mike. They…” The hand began to scratch again, but hard, like the itch went far below the skin.

“Why?”

“I—I don’t know… maybe because they killed me. You have a thingy out in my car, yet? My nieces, have blue flight times twenty-two cases of the binge granite, okay, John?”

She had to hurry. His mind seemed to be disintegrating. Alive or half-alive, Eddie was going to be full-dead in moments. “Did Sven put you up to this? Was he the one behind Mike and Malika?”

“Yes.” He spoke as if he were in a daze or a trance. “Sven. Sven was there. He told me”—His eyes lit up. “He told me to find you. To give you a message. Just Spiderman indigo haver jurisdiction car, car, car. He said you have a message.” His hand stopped scratching, wobbling with palsy. “I feel sick, I think.”

None of that made any sense. “And what’s the message?”

He paused, stared at the ceiling in thought. “The time’s not right for us, m’dear. But one day soon, you’ll come to me. A love like ours cannot be shared. For all who dare beware.”

Paige’s face contorted in painful confusion. “What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t—” He stopped speaking. His hand scratched into his arm, the skin giving way as small black legs pushed out. A proboscis flicked out touching the skin near the black insect legs.

Paige stepped back, calling earth fire to her.

Dexx recoiled as the heat radiating from her reached uncomfortable levels.

Eddie looked down at his arm, clearly disgusted. “All I wanted was

my life. I wanted it to get better for my wife and kids. I… wouldn't have it if I—" The legs pushed through and a butterfly walked out to his arm, the wings crumpled as though newly hatched from a cocoon. It flapped its wings experimentally, gently. The wings straightened, the beautiful blue color visible as they opened delicately.

"You." Eddie's eyes went to Paige, fear and anger lighting his eyes.

Before he had a chance to say another word, butterflies flooded the self-inflicted gash in his arm, flowing out with perfect wings. His mouth opened and hundreds more flew out as his jaws distended in a silent scream. His abdomen split open and a rush of swallowtail butterflies filled the room. Each butterfly grew out of him until nothing was left. Not his skin, his hair, skeleton, nails… nothing. Only the pile of clothes marked that Eddie had even been there at all.

Paige stared in stupefied wonder, the earth fire forgotten. What the hell?

Chapter 40

Vomit splashed to the floor. Dexx spun as Jack heaved again, but nothing came out. Duke hit the floor on hands and knees, spewing way more than should have come out of a person.

He ducked and dodged butterflies as they fluttered around the room. “The fuck?”

Windows blew out as blue energy from Paige’s hand shot to the closest source of the outside. Wind funneled thousands of butterflies from the building.

Wind whipped at his hair, his arm coming up to protect his eyes from anything mundane, magickal, or insect.

Paige cut the wind, with a couple butterflies left clinging to office furniture or those that found the rest of the precinct before Paige’s wind came up.

Jack slowly made his way to them, an arm covering his abdomen. “I’ve… never seen anything like”—pointed to where Eddie had stood and around the room—“before. That was *sick*.”

“No, *that* was sick.” Dexx pointed to Duke, still on all fours, trailing stringy vomit from his mouth. “*That*”—he pointed to the clothes that had recently been standing—“was the demon. Not trying to create an atmosphere of understanding and self-responsibility.”

Paige didn’t say anything, but he saw the silent war within. Demons weren’t cuddly. “Pea, if you have things handled here, I’m going to go do something I can do.”

She nodded, but stayed silent. Maybe she wasn’t as solid on the inside as she was on the outside.

Dexx couldn’t help at the station. His damn demon trap didn’t even

work. Paige didn't know where the demons were hiding. She couldn't get close to them. He couldn't keep her safe with his wards.

He had one thing left he could do.

The hot evening air hit him as he stepped out to the parking lot. He found the number he wanted and hit send. It rang and rang with no answer. Finally, the voicemail picked up. "Hello, and welcome to the Mental Health Hotline. If you are obsessive-compulsive, press 1 repeatedly…"

Dexx hung up and tried it again.

Nick picked up right before it went to voicemail. "'Lo?"

"Dude, I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Crashed when I got home. I'm so done. So done." Nick paused for a huge yawn.

Dexx fought the urge to join him. "Big case?"

"Yeah. Pulled an all-nighter. Damned paperwork."

"That's probably not what I'd be complaining about. You're soft, Nick, like a baby's butt."

Nick groaned. "Tell me you didn't call to rag on me."

Dexx rubbed his face and propped his foot against the brick wall behind him. "I need a favor."

"Sure, man. Anything. And, hey, how's Paige? Is it demons? Did something happen?"

"Yes, it is demons, and she's fine. Kind of. Sort of. Well, for now."

"Shit," Nick said. "I'm coming down."

"And do what? Emote at people? That's not what I need. Or Paige, either."

"You said demons."

"Which you're worthless against, you delicate little feeling flower."

"You seriously gotta back off, man. I have no idea if it works on demons, but you know what I can do."

“You’ve shown me.” And he had. Nick had reduced Dexx to a sobbing pool of tears in one moment, a murderous rage the next, gleeful fool right after that. Granted, he liked being seen as the fool, but not feeling like one. That also didn’t count the time Dexx couldn’t gather the energy to care due to the power of Nick’s delicate flower power. Yeah. The man could kick some serious ass. “Look, Paige is handling herself well. She has her emotions under control, mostly. She’s not breaking. Well—” When demons weren’t inside her, trying to take over.

“Were you going to finish that thought?”

“She’s doing well.”

“Fine. Then why’d you call? Your ink’s on its way. I should have tracking later today. Or…shoot. No. What time is it? Six? Tomorrow. Is Paige really all right? You’re not trying to snowball me, are you? You’ve gotten kind of close to her. I’d call it romantically entangled if I didn’t know you better.”

“But you do, so you should know better than to think it.” Except Nick was right. He was thinking those thoughts. What was getting into him?

“So answer my question. Is Paige okay?”

“If you’re really asking about your mother’s safety, she’s fine. I mean, I don’t think Paige is going to call down another demon to off her or anything. Just keep Rachel from doing something stupid. Especially right now. She’s fine, but things are a bit…fragile.”

“Like what? You *just* said she’s well. I got to read between the lines now? This isn’t like you at all.”

It was time to rip the Band-Aid off. “Like Rachel invited Paige to New York so she could surprise her with a restraining order.”

“What?” Nick paused.

“It was cold. It was calculated, and, boy, let me just tell you, it did the job with precision.”

“But Mom said—”

“You know what?” Dexx held up his hand, rage running like fire through him, and he smiled tightly at the man walking into the building. Sometimes, talking on the phone around others was awkward. He dropped his eyes to the concrete and continued, his voice lowered. “I really don’t care what that conniving, manipulative bitch said. I saw what happened.”

“No, you didn’t. Mom did and Paige did.”

“I saw it. We—” He pressed his thumb into his eye ridge. “Look, man, I don’t know how to explain it, but we were mind-linked or something. It’s weird, I know, but I saw what Rachel did. She *invited* Paige out. When she knew Paige was on the road, she had her served with the restraining order. But Paige didn’t get it because she was already on the way. Completely ambushed by your mom. I just saw something a minute ago that, well, was horrible, but isn’t even in the same *league* as what Rachel did.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Nick said. “Why would Mom do something like that?”

“Because she’s a bitch? Maybe possessed? I don’t know. I need a favor. A big one. I need you to take Leah out sometime today or tomorrow. Today would be better, but get her away from her grandmother.” He and Paige might end up dead tomorrow, so the sooner the better. “Then call me on my cell. Paige *needs* to hear her daughter’s voice.”

“Or I could tell Mom and—”

“You *can’t* let Rachel know.”

“You know her, Dexx. She’s protective, sure, but she’s not what Leslie and Paige think about her.”

How could the man be so stupid? “She abandoned her own daughters. You’re only close because she kept you on a tight leash.”

“You sang a different tune before you started spending so much time with Paige.”

“I couldn’t see it when I was so close to her. Dude. Take a step back. If you look at what she did to Alma, maybe the fault isn’t Paige’s or Leslie’s.”

“I’m not lying to my mother, Dexx. Paige lost Leah fair and square. She deserved to have her memories wiped.”

“Holy fuck balls.” Dexx fought to keep his anger restrained. “Did you just fucking say that?”

Nick snorted.

“Have you talked to her lately? See how she’s been, or catch up on *anything?*”

“No. Why would I? Grandma and Les made her forget she had a reason to call me.”

Was that a hint of bitterness in his tone? “And you couldn’t call her? She’s hurting from end to end, and you can’t call her to remind her you’re not the biggest asshole on the planet?”

Nick released a low breath. “You want a favor and thought you’d get it by calling me an asshole?”

Dexx let out a long breath, struggling to calm down. “Nick. Dude.”

“I’m listening.”

He didn’t know how to say what he wanted to. Seeing her side made him so pissed. But Nick was his best friend. “You’re not an asshole.”

“Thank you.”

“I do think you’re a bit blind when it comes to your mother. Whatever you think, Paige isn’t a bad person. Is she smart when in the fiery rage of a serial madwoman? No. Not when it’s a set-up. But she’s not a bad person. She loves her daughter, loves her family. All of them that don’t have a vendetta against her. That’s only normal.”

Nick sighed.

“I need her head in the game. Things could go pretty bad, and letting her hear her daughter’s voice just once could make the biggest

difference."

"I can't lie to my mother, D."

"Paige feels like she just lost Leah yesterday, and with her gift working again—"

"What?"

"Oh. Yeah. Okay, so stop the freak-out. This gift you were so scared of isn't so bad. She uses it for…well, I saw it, and… it isn't so bad."

"I'm not freaking out."

"Yes, you are. Your whole damn family is. You're all afraid of her because of something she was born with, and she's probably afraid her own daughter will be, too. After all, she's being raised by irrational people who won't give her a real fucking chance."

"Well, we don't—we don't talk about Paige." Nick's voice lowered. "Leah still loves her. A lot. I've passed on secret messages when I could."

Surprise knocked Dexx up the side of his head. For him to do that spoke volumes. "Great. So, can you do it? Can you get Leah on the phone?"

"Yeah," Nick sighed. "Okay. I'm on it. Just tell Paige to be careful if she ever talks to Rachel."

"You're afraid she'll blow your cover? You do realize that if you're this scared of your mother, that's not healthy. Right? You do see that."

"Dexx. She's my mother."

"Yeah. Strange, I have one, too, and she doesn't try to control me. She realizes I'm a big boy now, capable of thinking for myself."

"Shut up."

"You're my best friend, Nick. My best friend."

"Yeah." Nick paused. "I know."

"Tell me one thing and be honest. Is Leah in danger?"

Nick didn't answer immediately. "No."

"No, not while you're there to keep your mother calm? Or no, not

physically? Or no, not so's it'd show?"

The other side of the line was dead quiet.

Dexx sighed. "This has got to stop, Nick. There is one seriously hurt woman over here. Her heart is in pieces and…" He flared his nostrils in thought as he ground his teeth. "You're a grown man. You're working in one of the biggest law firms in the city. You can help her if you wanted to."

"When did you start caring about anyone other than Jackie?"

About two years ago, when he'd worked with Paige for over a month on a case. "When did you start being such a pussy?"

"Dude." Nick's tone held a hint of warning. "Back off."

"You know I'm gonna win."

"Yeah, whatever."

"Good. So you'll do it?"

"I already said I would. But the last time I did this, Leah and I almost got caught."

Dexx frowned. "Caught how?"

"Mom came looking for us. She forgot to tell us to pick something up at the store and thought she'd come get it herself."

"Shit. Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth? That's borderline insane."

"It's borderline something. Hey, Dexx?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"For looking out for my sister."

"Yeah, whatever." Dexx pushed himself off the building, his stomach rumbling. He needed food. STAT. "Just make sure you get a time so Paige can talk to her little girl." Before they all ended up dead.

"I'll start reviewing what I can do to get Leah back to Paige."

“Yeah, smart boy, why don’t you get on that, like, last week?”

“Shut up, douchebag.”

“Ass-wipe.”

“Coc—”

“See ya!” Dexx hung up. They could call each other names until the sun went down.

He just hoped this wasn’t a little too little, a little too late.

Chapter 41

Paige's eyes followed Dexx as he plopped down in the chair beside her borrowed desk. He blew out his cheeks and sat back.

The precinct was still in disarray from the dead man walking, and butterflies still turned up randomly. At least they didn't turn people into Eddie zombies and seemed to be *regular* butterflies in every way.

Paige finished reading the email from the doctor. Eddie Lopez's body had indeed gone missing from the morgue. The doctor collected a few of the butterflies and sent them to the lab for analysis. She was willing to bet the butterflies would have trace DNA from Eddie. She didn't know how she knew, but she did.

Love notes? Via dead bodies?

Dexx tapped the desk with his knuckles.

She looked up, her eyebrow raised. "Yes?"

"Can you do anything else here?" he asked, his expression deadpan.

Special Agents Scott and Forde were holed up in the conference room, their laptops open. It looked like New Roads had done everything but take over the station. Pretty ballsy move on Brian's part, but one Paige couldn't disagree with. Evidence had been gathered. Statements had been written. She'd reviewed everything a half-dozen times already.

"Nope."

"Great. I need food. Now. Fries. And a burger with extra pickles and bacon. Lots of bacon. Maybe a shake. Chocolate and really big." He used his hands to show how big a shake he needed.

She snorted. "They don't come in that size. Where do you put it all, anyway?"

He leapt to his feet, digging his keys out of his pocket. "High

metabolism."

"Why are we driving? The diner's right down the street."

"There's another one down the highway I want to try. Brian said it'll change my life."

Her chortle died with a *hmm*. "Oh, dear."

"No judging."

The air temp had dropped a degree, but the humidity had risen. Not that she could really tell. She looked forward to returning to Denver, where the air was drier and cooler.

Dexx had the windows down. Jackie seemed to prefer it that way. Paige couldn't disagree.

They arrived at the diner, a little chrome and turquoise building off the highway. Old-time rock 'n' roll blasted through the speakers. Their waitress took their order and be-bopped to the kitchen in her pink poodle skirt.

"Heavy day," Dexx said, shoving his straw in his soda, picking ice out with his fork.

"Heavy week." Paige removed the lemon slice from her iced tea with gross face and set it aside. "I'll be glad when this case is over."

He nodded, his lips pursed. "Want to talk?"

"About?"

"About your mother, your daughter, your memories. Anything. I'm being your friend here, Pea. You've had a lot of shit thrown at you and no time to deal with it. A lot of shit done *to* you. We need a second to absorb, process."

"Oh, good grief. I'm not going to sit here and cry on your shoulder."

"Maybe if you'd listened to Leslie, you wouldn't have had to call the demon to kill Rachel, and we wouldn't be in this mess."

She massaged her temple. He was right. Nothing else had to be said about it, though. His words were true. End of story.

He snapped his fingers in front of her face. “Yeah. Like that. Whatever is going on right there, you need to share. Get it out. Purge it.”

“Because talking about it will make everything all better?”

He shrugged. “No and yes, all at the same time.”

“The thing is…” She let her voice trail off as thoughts and emotions battled with each other inside of her mind. She didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to share, but her mouth had other ideas. “I hate her. I really, really hate her.”

Dexx lifted his eyebrows in acknowledgment. “I’m not her biggest fan ever.”

“I want her dead.” Paige met his gaze. “Before that, I want to maim her, to hurt her.” She ground her teeth. “I don’t know how to handle this, control it. This anger—it changed me.” Her throat clogged with emotion.

Dexx laid his hand next to hers on the table. “You’re stronger than you were then. You’re handling this a lot better.”

“I called that demon, Dexx. I told him to kill my mother and I really, really wanted him to. I didn’t think of Leah or how that would affect her. My only thoughts were for myself.”

“We’re all allowed selfish moments.”

“Not homicidal ones. The thing is, I’d do it again. The thought’s crossed my mind. Who would I summon? Who would do as I commanded?”

“You could hire a hitman.”

“Demons are cheaper.”

“Wow.” He released a short breath, his eyebrows raised. “Just wow. I hadn’t thought of that. So, no soul signing?”

“I’m a summoner. So, no.”

“You could hire me. I’d do it practically for free. Just pay for my gas; I’m your man.”

“You’d go to jail for me, too?”

“Look, Pea.” Dexx grabbed a sugar packet and dumped it on the table. “If she’d done to me what she did to you, I’d be in jail. She’d be dead. By my hands. Probably turn myself in and brag about it.”

Paige’s eyebrows rose in slow increments.

“I’m not a nice person, either.” He ran his fingertip through the spilled sugar. “That doesn’t make me bad. I just don’t take shit from anybody. I know my limits. Well, sometimes I do. Most times I stay within them.”

She watched his finger move the grains of sugar around, drawing a picture of Mickey Mouse. At least she thought it was Mickey. It could have been a camel.

“But what you’ve gotta do now is figure out what you’re going to do with it. The hate, the anger. How are you going to use it?”

“I feel like I’m evil or tainted or something horrible.”

“You’re not. At least, not yet. Are you going to go around killing people, finger gunning people and expecting demons to finish them off?”

The obvious answer was no. Yes, the anger beckoned, but it wasn’t enough to drive her into homicidal action. Thoughts? Sure. Thoughts were easy. Actions were different. “What happened to the smartass? Where’d this come from?”

“Being a smartass is my cover so that when I have my one minute of smart, I’m brilliant.”

She rubbed her eye. “I don’t want to go back to the lying. That’s the one thing I loved about the last few years and didn’t even realize it. I didn’t have to lie. I didn’t have to cover anything up. Having the chief and Special Agent Scott know is such a relief. I won’t have that in Denver, though.”

“The solution is to quit. Either quit the demon thing or quit the Force.”

“I’m almost glad.” Thoughts churned wildly in her brain, but her heart

was calm. The kind of calm that only comes when someone stumbles upon a truth they wouldn't otherwise have believed. "I'm… not happy they made me forget, but there's a certain relief in it. All this. Magick. Demons. The responsibility."

Dexx nodded.

"Rachel. Leah."

Dexx bit the inside of his lip.

"What a fucking coward. I did it. Why couldn't I just see?"

"Hold on a sec—I've seen people who—" He clicked his tongue. "I mean, everyone has their demons. They have their bad days and their fears. There are lots of people overwhelmed and they all handle it different. Some people kill others. Some kill themselves. Others grow into hateful, spiteful old biddies. You only showed you're human."

"Because that's awesome."

Dexx curled the tips of his fingers in hers. "You needed that break, and it's okay. It happened. Get over it. Move on and be better."

She still felt like a jerk.

"You're not a bad person, Pea."

She couldn't stop the negative emotions twisting her gut.

He captured her gaze and held it. "And I'm not going anywhere. Not until you need me to."

What? Where had that come from? Part of her leapt with joy. The other flinched at the implications of his statement. "You're a traveler, Dexx. You don't know how to stay in one place."

"Maybe. But I don't care. I'm here. You need me, so yes, that's that."

"And if I need you for a year?"

His eyebrows rose, the corners of his eyes drooping. "We'll have to see when we get there."

Paige extracted her hand from his. The idea, the thought of allowing another person in…

She shook herself. No. They'd solve this case. He'd go back to New York, or maybe he'd find another hunt down the road. They'd go their separate ways and be done. She needed to redraw the line. "We need to find Lucius. After he walked out of the cell, he disappeared."

He frowned at her hand as she tucked it beneath the table. "I don't know. Maybe you should let him go, do his own thing."

"This coming from the same guy who wants to send all demons to Hell."

"Right. Right. But I'm practical, too. He'll hold until we get our chance."

The waitress came by with their food. "Anything else?" she asked.

They both waved her off, and she went to another table.

"But the thing is, Pea, you're open for possession, which means you being near any demon is a bad, bad, bad idea."

"You heard him, though. He doesn't feel he has to possess me."

"Great for him. I still say let him be. I'd rather you were safe."

Hearing those words, the caring he offered—Jesus. She didn't know what to do with it. Take it? How? Give it back? Reject it? Remain independent and alone? "While a bunch of demons run wild on the Earth?"

He shoved several fries in his mouth at once.

"I see what you did there."

He harrumphed at her. There could have been words, but the fries stole them.

She concentrated on her burger. Well, she had to prepare it first. She realized she was weird. She owned it. She took off the bun, setting it on a napkin. Then, placed the tomato and the lettuce with it. Soggy bun? Gross. Green tomato? Also gross. She took the mustard and slathered the patty, placing the pickles on top with careful precision.

"There's a drug for your psychosis. You know that, right?"

She glared at him and cut into her burger.

“Okay.” He shoved a bite of burger in his cheek, resembling a chipmunk. “Why can’t we call in the angels?”

“My mother is an angel whisperer. If that doesn’t tell you enough about them, I don’t know what will.”

“I get it. She’s a bitch, but some of the demons you’ve summoned are jackasses. You’re not a jackass. Also, I’ve read the Bible. Angels aren’t awesome, but at least they could help protect the gate. You’d think, right?”

“The demons set up guardians to protect the gate. Did the angels? No. In the exorcism, I caught a few things. Gabriel was the one who bound Lucius between planes. He’s the one who left the gate unguarded and allowed the key to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Angels.”

“They see us as a disease.”

Dexx paused in bringing his hamburger to his mouth. “Ouch.”

“I know. Fight for us? Angels? No. I’d prefer to keep them out of my sandbox. If they’re our keepers, I’d rather face hell.”

“You’re afraid of what the angels might do to you.”

“Of what they’ve already done.”

He chewed, reminding her of a cow. “Yeah. Um, point. I wish we had your globe. Any idea why it broke?”

“I don’t know, but it’s got me concerned.”

“Concerned.” He raised his eyebrows. “It has me fucking terrified.”

She dipped a fry in a pile of mustard. “Yeah. Me, too. It was working, and now it’s not. Now I can’t see any magickal people anywhere? That doesn’t make sense. At all.”

“So, did they disappear, or can you just not see them?”

“You really think that every demon on the face of the planet simply vanished?”

“Right.” Dexx rubbed his face. “How screwed are we?”

“We have a demon summoner who can’t summon or banish demons until we figure how these damned”—she pointed to her chest and let out a long breath—“things can be fixed. We sent the witch home, who happened to be our best line of defense. And we’re surrounded by demons and angels with no clue who’s on what side.”

Dexx flattened his lips. “I’d say we’re pretty screwed.”

“Up the ass.”

Chapter 42

Paige had Brian set a watch on Mike and Malika and the next morning, they arrested Malika and Jones for suspicion of murder. A few pieces of evidence had come in. A hair that was quite possibly Malika's, though they were still waiting for the DNA results. One of Jones's fingerprints. It was enough. Paige knew they were guilty. It was only a matter of time for the courts to provide due process.

Her targets, however, were Sven and that damn key. She needed to get either Malika or Jones to share his location so she could gain possession of the key. She couldn't leave without it, and she couldn't stay.

Malika sat in the interrogation room, petite, finely boned, and in control. Her mocha skin gleamed with health under the glare of the fluorescent light above her. "Paige." She raised her cuffed hands. "I would shake your hand, but I've decided not to."

Paige took the opposing chair. "They're only handcuffs, Malika. It could be a lot worse." Like being tied to a table while a spell was cast into your bones. "You understand your rights?"

"I feel so guilty about everything. If there's any way I can help, tell me."

This woman was like a funhouse of traps. "Tell me about the key."

"The key?"

"You can stop playing stupid. You know what I'm talking about. We know you're guilty of murder. You're going away for a long time. Just tell me where the key is."

"I'm not sure I know anything about a *key*."

"I could help you out. Just tell me what you know about it."

Malika's warm expression slithered away as something cold replaced it.

Paige slid back in her chair. "How did you find it?"

Malika's lips flattened.

"Help me. You're going down for murder. You've got multiple life sentences ahead of you. I could put in a good word for you. Maybe send you someplace nicer."

"Nicer than what?"

"You haven't been to jail yet. Trust me, you want my help."

Malika tapped the table with her fingertips and dropped her gaze. "I found it among my mother's things."

"Where is it?"

Malika sat back in her chair. "We tried to open it."

"Why do I care? I just want to know *where* it is."

The other woman smiled slyly. "There's something inside. I didn't know what it was. Not at first."

"I feel like we're flirting and all I want to do is get to the good part. If you know something, spill it. Do not play with me. I am not in the mood."

Malika's lips twisted as if she'd eaten something sour. "Someone is trapped inside, someone who understands the gate."

"Who?"

Malika raised her eyebrows, a slight smile gracing her lips.

Paige rested her arms on the table. "See, here's the thing I'm having a hard time figuring out. Everything in this case seems to fall around this key and opening the gate. What if you knew what the key was, and you knew it opened unspeakable power? And what if you couldn't use the key? What would you do?"

"I would gather magickally rich people and use the power of their blood."

Blatant. “Okay. So that was your idea? You’re not going to lay the blame on Mike?”

“I discovered the key. I gathered the coven.”

“That doesn’t seem like you. You seem so much kinder than this.”

Malika’s handcuffs clanked against the table. “You can enter the other side any time you wish.”

“The other side of what?” Now they were getting somewhere. Keep her talking. Unless this was the plan. She had to be careful.

“The gate. He said you had the power.”

“Who?” Three guesses, who but only one name popped up in her mind.

“You don’t know?” Malika scoffed.

“Why would I? *How* would I?”

“He’s one of them.”

“Which *them*?”

Malika pulled back. “What do you mean? Which ‘them?’ There is only one.”

Paige couldn’t tell if the woman had lost her mental capacity, or if she was just clueless. flopping from knowledgeable to clueless innocence was starting a headache.

“He’s an angel, sent to help us. To free us.”

So someone other than Sven? Or was she trying to say Sven was an angel? “Angels? Free you? Are you sure?”

“Can I speak to him?” Malika’s dark eyes took on a maniacal gleam. “The First. He is the First, isn’t he? The one called…” She paused.

Paige felt the power gather around the other woman and sat up straighter.

“Lucius.”

The name vibrated through her, ricocheting through every vein, coursing along every nerve. She gripped the table until her fingertips

went white.

“Lucius.” A twisted smile played along Malika’s lips. “Come forth and speak to the one who freed you from your bonds.”

The intense power pulsed around Paige, tightening, constricting, choking the very life from her body. It didn’t make sense why. Lucius wasn’t possessing her, wasn’t connected to her.

Someone knocked on the door, the sound loud in the magickal silence.

Both women jerked.

Malika’s smile slithered into something nicer, but her eyes held the knowledge that she had nearly won. “I know you’re in there, Lucius. She can’t protect you forever.”

“We’re done here. Please, continue to stay seated. I’m sure someone will be along.”

Paige went to the door and closed it behind her, her hands shaking.

Brian clenched his fists. “Saw you weren’t getting anywhere with Malika. I want a full confession.”

“She said she’d gathered powerful people and used their blood. I have the confession.”

His eyes blazed with dark emotions. “Yeah. I heard that. Get one from Jones. I want both these scumbags going away for a very long time.”

“I need to know where the key is.”

“I’m aware, but these two are in our grasp. We can get these two. In trying to get Sven and that key, we could lose all of them. Let’s catch the ones we can.”

“The key has the potential to destroy hundreds of thousands of lives. Millions, even. Billions.”

“I get it. I do, but”—he held his hands in front of him like he was holding a large ball—“we have these two. Let’s take the wins we can.”

Yeah, well, what if by taking the win in this little battle, it cost them the war?

Brian pointed down the hallway with his chin. “Jones is one door down. Get a confession out of him. I’ll be in the security room.”

“Right.” She steeled herself and opened the door.

Jones’s expression shifted from boredom to mild interest.

Paige leaned against the wall. “Where’s the key?”

Jones raised his eyebrows. “Not even a little foreplay first?”

“Why? We have your DNA at the crime scene.” It was still too early for DNA, but they had the FBI on the case. She could bluff that lie. “Malika just confessed, pinning you as the mastermind in all this.”

Jones snorted, focusing his gaze on the far corner of the room. “She wouldn’t. I know you’re lying.”

“Why wouldn’t she? She’s facing multiple life sentences. Do you have any idea what hard time’s like for a female?”

“Do I care?”

“If you care for her at all, you should.”

“She was a means to an end. Just like Betsy. Just like Ashley. Just like Eddie.”

“Okay. So if we didn’t catch you, what? You were going to kill Malika, too?”

“This is a lot bigger than a few human lives, Whiskey. If you haven’t discovered that yet, you disappoint me.”

“What side are you on?”

He sat up, tapping the table in front of him with his index finger. “You’ve got the demon inside of you now and soon. We’re going to unleash it and open the gate to heaven.”

Heaven? *Shit*. How many things had she got wrong?

He chuckled and sat back. “Didn’t see that one coming, did you? Yes. I’m working for the angels.”

“Using the demons.”

“They were the ones dumb enough to set up guards on the gate in the

first place."

"Why would the gate be located at the Metley Plantation?"

"You seriously don't believe the gate can be pinned down to a single point of rock, do you? Something so immense, something so ethereal, something so far beyond your understanding?"

"Then why here?"

Jones took in a deep breath and released it slowly. "Because this is where Gabriel tied Lucius."

"And that's important because?"

He tipped his head to the side.

"Because?"

"We needed the soul of the final guardian. The key is in pieces, and this is the only way to mend it. When he tears himself out of your body, your soul will be sucked into the key, and there will be no more demon summoner."

Souls sucked in the key. Souls were *already* in the key. Did that even make sense? Sort of. Yes. Souls were like batteries, but how many souls would it take to power up a fragment of a key to open an ethereal gate?

"You can't escape, even if you did know where the key was. You'd only be doing us a favor by going where we need you to be."

"Fine. Then tell me where I need to go."

With a sudden burst of speed, Jones shot to his feet, grabbing Paige's arm.

Every muscle in her body was primed for a fight. Even with his hands cuffed together, he could be deadly. She wasn't stupid.

He brought the underside of her arm into the light. "Do you feel it?"

She tried to break his grasp, but he held it with an iron grip.

He looked at her through his lashes, his expression dark. "Even if you escape, you're open to possession. You're weak. You're a liability. Gradually, you'll slip into insanity. No more demon summoner. No more

demons." His eyes trailed to her chest, and the symbols hidden under her soft T-shirt. "You'll beg me to kill you."

"Like you did to the others?"

Jones released her. "Your death will be different," he said, sitting down.

"How?"

He said nothing, settling into a comfortable position in his chair. "You know, you're pretty smart. I didn't think anyone would have figured out what we were doing, but you did. Well, sort of. So, still a disappointment."

He was sick. A sick asshole. Her stomach twisted like she'd eaten too much grease. "What do you mean, sort of?"

"You guessed why we killed who we killed and the order that we killed them in."

"That was easy."

"He said you were smart."

"Sven?"

"Gold star. But don't you want to know how close you were to actually solving this thing?"

Paige rolled her jaw. "I already know. I have confessions from both of you. I also know who the mastermind is. You might think it's you, but it's not. It's Sven Seven Tails. Trust me. He's playing you like a fiddle. All I need to know is where the key is."

"He's the mastermind? A demon?" Jones threw back his head and laughed.

Something finally clicked into place. "You're a Nephilim."

Jones sat back and shook his head. "That would be a nice ribbon around the box, wouldn't it? I'm half angel, half human?"

"Fits."

"I'm a little short, don't you think?"

“Could be a birth defect.”

“You might want to go get your last supper,” he said with a wrinkling of his nose. “By tonight, you’re going to be dead and the power of the gate will be mine.”

“You mean yours and Malika’s.”

A cold smile lit his lips. “I mean mine.”

Paige stood up. “Where’s the key?”

“Not yet.” His eyes widened in surprise, his smile faltering. “He’s not there.”

“Who’s not where?”

“The demon.” Jones rose. “Where is he?”

Time to get out. She closed the door behind her.

“Where is he?” Jones shouted through the door.

White met her in the main room.

Paige shook out her fingers, her heart racing. “He confessed like you wanted.”

“I got everything.” Brian walked to his office, gesturing for her to follow. “Including the threat on your life.”

“He’s *been* threatening my life, Chief.” She had a hard time feeling any additional panic. He’d already handed her ass to her a couple of times.

“This was different.” Brian fished the phone out of his pocket. “I’m setting up a security detail. I’m not going to let him touch you.”

“How are they going to defend against demons? Or angels? Sven is a notoriously ugly demon. He’ll get me if that’s what he wants. And are we completely ignoring the fact he’s sending me love letters via dead bodies? I’m not under threat of death from him.”

“I don’t care, Paige. You’re in my parish, under my protection and, by God, I’m going to protect you.”

“With sticks?”

“With bullets.”

“Against demons.”

“You don’t have any say in the matter.”

Paige put a lid on whatever else she was going to say. Stubborn men. They had to figure out how to fix their biggest liability.

Her.

Chapter 43

Paige knew he'd react poorly. Even though she tried to soften the blow.

"He said what?"

"Dexx, please." Paige dropped her badge on the table and stuffed her gun into the drawer. "Don't overreact."

"Overreact? Overreact, huh? The man just said he was going to kill you tonight and I'm overreacting?"

"He's in jail." Paige headed for the bathroom.

He flung his hands in the air and stormed to the window. "Sven's not! Hell, Lucius just *walked* through every demon trap I could set in place, so no, being in jail does *not* comfort me."

She turned at the bathroom door. "If this were a normal situation, you'd say we needed a trap."

"Normally? Sure. That's a great idea, but not this time."

"Why not?"

"Because!" He clawed his hands. "Because it's you. This time, it would be you in the trap. No. Vetoed."

She didn't know what else to do. She had no idea how to win this one. They were on the losing side. "I have something I have to tell you."

He stared at her, his smile upside down, waiting.

"Bal came to see me. He said that every time he's near me, he feels the need to possess me."

"I already know that. Already. You want to know how I knew that?" Dexx folded his arms over his chest and tipped his head to the side. "The symbols carved into you, then magickally burned into you. You're as open to demon possession as a child."

“Okay. Did you know there’s a large population of demons and angels gathering here?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I vaguely recall you mentioning something like that offhand.”

She shrugged. It’d been a busy day. She couldn’t remember everything she’d said.

“Do we have a defense against angels?”

“Not that I know of.”

“And do we know why the angels are here?”

“Since they’re the ones that bound the guardians to the Earth and left the gates unguarded? Nope, but I’m guessing it’s not good.”

He paced away. “Shit.”

“Right. And—because we needed things to be more exciting—Sven has all the guardians. All of Lucius’s brethren. They’re all trapped in the part of the key he has.”

Dexx’s face paled as he turned toward her. “You’re kidding me.”

“I wish. He seems to think that with Lucius as the final soul, he can complete the blood spell necessary to empower the key so he can open the gate.”

“Tell me that’s not possible.”

“How the hell would I know?” She ducked into the bathroom and closed the door. She’d been holding high pee since the police station. She’d needed to get out of there, to go somewhere she felt safe. Not the inn, but with Dexx. He made her feel safe.

He made her feel safe, but how safe could she be when his traps didn’t work?

Finished, she dried off her hands and reentered the bedroom.

Dexx sat in the window seat, his phone in his hands. He waved it. “My ink came in. We’re going to—”

“No.”

“Yes. You have a knot-work of spells branded into your bones that allows demons to come in. We have to counter that somehow.”

“With a tattoo?”

“They used a knife. I’ve got ink.”

She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t deny she needed to be able to do her job. She couldn’t stop being a summoner. What was she going to say every time a demon popped up? Go away? Nicely? No. Her world, or at least the parts she knew of it, weren’t going to disappear simply because she was broken. She needed to get fixed.

“What if we cut the symbols?”

“You sent the witch who could do that away.”

Paige winced. “Fine. What did you have in mind?”

Dexx laid out a couple of ideas. They decided on two after a great deal of debating back and forth, sometimes with words repeated in the same way. He retrieved his box from the front desk and got to work.

Paige did everything she could think of to keep her mind off of what Dexx was doing, but that was somewhat hard, considering the fact he was sticking a needle into her skin repeatedly. It hurt like hell.

With her two tattoos in place and her skin an angry red around them, Dexx declared her done. “Let’s see if they work. Summon Balnore.”

Bracing herself, Paige reached inside and whispered, “Balnore, I need you.”

Nothing happened.

Paige turned to Dexx.

He shrugged. “Try using the mirror. The first time you summoned him, you used a candle and the mirror, and there were things. You know, other scary things. With fire.”

“But I don’t need to. The mirror just helps sometimes.”

Someone knocked on the door.

Dexx frowned at her. “Did you order a pizza?”

She quirked her lips, but dug her gun out from the table drawer.

One hand on the Glock shoved in the back of his pants, Dexx opened the door a crack. He jerked back, shaking his head, then widened the door.

"You called?" Balnore asked, looking a little disheveled.

Paige frowned at him. "You felt the need to knock?"

"Because when you call me, you never throw up protections." He rubbed the dark stubble lacing his chin. "It's safer this way."

"I didn't think you could—" Paige stopped herself. "I mean, when you're summoned—"

"I need to show up where you tell me to? No. What's up?"

How much did she know about Balnore? He played things safe. Didn't rock the boat. He guided her when she needed it. But what did she know about him? Really? "I need to know if the protections worked."

"What protections?"

"The ones Dexx laid on me. The tattoos."

Balnore shook his head.

She spun on Dexx. "You made this permanent."

He opened his mouth, closed it, held up a finger, and promptly went back to his notes. "It should've worked."

Balnore narrowed his eyes at Paige. "Huh." He took two steps closer to her, remaining just out of arm's reach. "It did work. A little. It's easier to control the temptation. I don't feel as though you're pulling me into you."

"Ha!" Dexx snapped his fingers and pointed to her. "I told you it would work. Can you summon another to see if it worked?"

"No!" Balnore held up both hands, his eyes wide. "No."

"But if it worked," Paige said, "there shouldn't be an issue."

"I feel as though you're not pulling me into you. I didn't say I didn't feel the need to possess you. I simply have better control over it. The

brands are still whole. They're still working."

Paige pinched the bridge of her nose. "How do I fix that?"

"I don't know, Peanut."

"Well," Dexx said, gesturing to the demon with one hand. "What have you been doing?"

"Gathering information. Since her sphere doesn't work, I decided that would be the best use of my skills."

Feeling useless wasn't something Paige was used to. "What did you learn? Is everyone still here? Or have they left?"

"They're still here. If anything, there are more of them now. Angels and demons. And talking to them didn't help. Everyone's confused. They don't know why there's a surge in power, who the major players are, or what's going on."

"Then why are they here?" Paige asked.

"Because this is where they were summoned to."

Paige blinked. "Summoned?"

Balnore raised a hand, dipping his head to the side.

"I didn't summon them."

"Someone did."

"There's someone else like Paige?" Dexx asked.

"No." Balnore folded his hands in front of him and leaned against the door. "At least, not likely. There is usually only one like her in every generation."

Dexx's closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm getting really bad *Buffy* flashbacks. What if she dies? Is another awakened? What if she's possessed, thrown into the back of her own mind? Is that enough to bring another demon summoner into play?"

"Dexx. Sometimes, your mind gives me a headache."

"Sometimes it gives me one, too."

"I got Jones to confess," Paige said. "But they wouldn't give Sven up. I

don't know where the key is. I don't know where he is. I only know they were able to shove all the guardians into the fragment they have."

"The guardians?" Balnore asked, his expression stony. "Where is Lucius?"

"He was in jail, but he walked right out."

"How?"

Paige licked her lips, then bit down on them as she struggled to find the words to explain what had happened. "He has earth magick from me, so the demon traps didn't work."

"Do you think he summoned everyone?" Dexx asked.

"They've been gathering for a while," Balnore said, his eyes narrowed on Paige.

She shriveled under his gaze. "What about Malika or Jones?"

"Anyone can summon. But, no, I don't think they're the ones. Whoever it is can summon almost as well as Paige."

"Almost as well as I used to."

Dexx ran his hands over his head. "Who are the players? This is so frustrating."

Paige massaged her temple. "Jones is connected to angels, but he's not a Nephilim."

"He would not be," Balnore said. "No. We keep a close eye on all Nephilim."

Dexx paced three steps, turned, and paced back. "How did you figure out he was attached to angels?"

"He said that he wanted to open the Gate to Heaven." She winced. "But he can also track the movements of demons. Who can do that besides summoners?"

"Other demons," Dexx said.

"Angels," Balnore added.

"Great." She clipped her gun onto her belt. "I need some air."

“And what about tonight?” Dexx stepped into her path, meeting her gaze. “They’re going to try to kill you tonight.”

“When they spring the trap, we’ll be ready.”

Dexx raised his face to the ceiling. “Really? How? We don’t have a plan. We don’t have anything laid down. We have nothing.”

“Fine. When they spring the trap, we’ll have a plan.” Which was her way of saying they were fucked. She had no idea what they could do and no clue what they should be preparing for.

All she knew was that if it was her last night, she wanted to breathe some fresh air before she died.

Go team. Rawr.

Chapter 44

Paige made her way to the lake, watching the waves lap against the beach. She needed something more than a plan. They needed a way to win. With broken toys and broken weapons and no information, though, she had no idea how they'd make that happen.

She stooped, picked up a fairly flat rock, and threw it at the lake.

It plopped loudly and sank.

"You're doing it wrong."

She hadn't even heard him come up behind her. "Dexx."

He ran his fingers along her arm.

She took a step away. That wasn't what she needed. She needed a level head. She needed a way out of this mess. He didn't provide that. Yes, she trusted him with her life, but that didn't mean he was the best thing for her in a situation like this. Those fingers felt too good along her skin, making her crave more. The warmth he offered. The feeling of comfort. Safety.

What a joke. Safety. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

He pushed a rock into the palm of her right hand, laying his fingers around her waist. "First, you've got to loosen up," he murmured in her ear.

Ripples of desire shivered over her. "Dexx. Now is really the wrong time."

"Yes. Because the world is going to end, so finding solace is always the wrong thing. Shut up." He moved her hips from side to side. "Relax."

She smiled, unable to help herself. She felt silly moving as he directed. Well, following someone else's direction at all felt odd and out of place.

“What if I don’t want to?”

He stilled behind her. The tip of his nose ran along her neck. “All I’m doing is showing you how to skip a stone.”

Her skin sizzled where he touched her. “Right.”

His hot breath filtered through her hair, warming the back of her neck.

All she wanted to do was to turn around, grab his head, and claim his lips. She wanted to taste him, touch him, devour him.

“Paige.”

No. She broke from his embrace. “The wind’s too high. You can’t skip on this water, anyway.”

He cocked an eyebrow and threw his stone. It skipped twice on the broken water and then disappeared.

“What are—”

Dexx’s phone blared, “Warning. Warning. An idiot is trying to call you. Pick up the phone. An idiot is trying to call you. Warning.”

Paige chuckled and walked away.

“Hey. Did you do it? Great. Hold on.” He stopped Paige and handed her the phone. “Here.”

“What?” She took it, not quite sure what she was supposed to do with it. Obviously, talk, but to whom and why?

He waved at her with a quit-asking-questions expression and headed down the beach.

She put the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Nick.”

How long had it been since she spoke to him? Years. Right after Leah was born, they’d started talking to one another again. They’d actually developed a pretty good relationship. He’d decided to go into law, so they’d had things to talk about.

But after her memories were banished, she hadn’t remembered she

had a reason to call him. Guilt slammed into her like an anvil.

"How're you doing?"

She smiled through the painful embarrassment. "I've been better. You?"

"I'm doing good, doin' good."

"I, uh, Dexx said you got a job with a big law firm." What she really needed to say was sorry. Sorry for forgetting about him. Sorry for trying to kill his mother. Sorry for abandoning him. Sorry for forgetting his birthday for years.

"Yeah." His cheerful tone sounded forced. "I got the job about a year ago."

"Oh. Right. Yeah. Time flies." Lame. So lame.

"Hey, don't sweat it. I hear you've had your hands full with detective stuff and then having your mind wiped clean."

"Did you know about it?"

"Leslie told me. I didn't completely agree with it, but what could I do, you know? It's not like I have any pull, and you couldn't call or stop by anyway, so…" He trailed off.

"How is she?"

"Leah?" The tight constriction of forced enjoyment disappeared and became more natural. "She's doing great. We're out shopping for ice cream. I had a sudden craving for mint chocolate chip."

Paige chuckled. "I like Starbuck's coffee almond, myself. But I can't find it anywhere."

"Oh," he said, his voice pained. "Going for the expensive stuff. Well, Leah and I are sharing, and she's too young for coffee."

Paige could hear a girl laugh in the background and a muffled, "Am not."

"Here," he said. "Would you like to talk to her?"

"Sure." Hope flared painfully in her chest. "Hey, Nick?"

"Yeah."

She turned her back to Dexx's retreating form, her voice small. "What do I say?"

He was quiet for a short moment, and she began to feel stupid. She was Leah's mother. How wouldn't she know what to talk about?

"She's into soccer. You get her talking about that, and you won't have to talk. You'll just be forced to listen forever and ever and ever—Ow! You little twerp." He laughed. "Here. Talk to your mom."

Paige waited anxiously until her daughter's voice came on the line. "Mom?"

"Leah." Paige's eyes filled with tears and her throat tightened. Joy surged through her, filling every empty void she hadn't realized existed. Leah's voice had changed. It was lower now, more mature. Her voice. Leah's…voice. It felt so good, so good to hear it. A thousand questions rushed to the surface. "Oh my God, Boo. How are you?"

"I'm good," Leah said stiffly.

A ghost of a laugh escaped. "What have you been up to lately? I want to hear everything."

"Oh, stuff."

"Like, what kind of stuff? Have you learned anything in school?"

"Not really," Leah said. "We mostly review stuff I already know."

Paige snorted. "Nick said you were playing soccer."

Paige listened as Leah went on and on about soccer, and all the girls she played with, and the last game she'd played. Each word fell on her heart, warming something so cold she'd thought would never melt. She blinked back the tears when her brother said they had to go.

"Boo," Paige called.

"Yeah."

"I love you," she said softly.

"Yeah, okay."

Paige's heart twisted. But what did she think? That a little girl was going to keep on loving someone who wasn't a part of her life, who never called, never showed up? No.

Leah was quiet for a minute. Paige thought she'd handed the phone off, but then her voice came through, smaller this time. "I miss you. Why'd you disappear? Why didn't you fight?"

Paige wanted to tell her everything, but she was a kid. She didn't need to hear all the horror. She didn't need all the details. "It's a really long story."

"I don't care."

"I know. When we have more time, I'll try to explain, but… I did fight. It just wasn't the right way."

"Whatever that means."

"I miss you," Paige whispered through the pain of knowing the phone call was about to end, that the darkness would come back, the ice would take over again. "I love you with every bone in my body."

"Okay. Well, bye."

"Bye."

She held the phone away from her ear, ready to hang up until she heard her brother's voice come through. She put it back to her ear, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Hello?"

"Hey," he said. "I need your number so I can call you more often. I doubt you're going to let that pain-in-the-ass hang around all the time."

Paige snorted and wished she hadn't. The few tears that had sprung from her eyes had goobered up her nose. "You knew he was a pain, and you still sent him?"

"He's a great person repellant, so I thought he might work as a demon repellant, too." He waited. "You never know. It might've worked."

Paige smiled. She could hear the checkout counter dinging. "All right. Well, um, I'll talk to you later. I'll get your number from Dexx and I'll

text you. Pretty sure you don't have a pen handy to write down my number. Especially not after *boutique* ice cream."

"Uh, no," he said simply. "'Sides, I lose paper all the time. Hey, we gotta go before Mom gets nervous. She doesn't like us being out too long."

"Short leash?"

He snorted. "Something like that. I'll talk to you later."

"Yeah. Talk to you later."

She stood there, the phone in her hand, feeling more than a little shellshocked. The edges were going blurry, and the light had gone out on the screen where Nick's name still sat. She wasn't ready for the light to go off, for his name to disappear. She'd heard her daughter's voice. She'd heard her daughter talk about her life. Paige's arms ached with emptiness. Her soul begged for more, to call Nick back, to just get one more minute on the phone with Leah. Just a little longer.

Dexx stood behind her and wrapped her in his arms, holding her close. "You'll get to see her again. And you're going to get her back."

She turned and buried her tears in his chest. Her heart broke again and again, as the tears soaked his shirt. He didn't say anything at all, but let her grieve. She hoped he was right. She wished with everything she had. Her life would have to change. She wouldn't be able to chase after demons anymore. She needed her daughter. She was incomplete without her.

And next time, no one was going to use Leah against her.

Chapter 45

Paige and Dexx had been reviewing the evidence all morning, trying to deduce where Sven was hiding. Nothing. She knew they couldn't sit around and wait for the answers to magickally appear out of the air. That was stupid. They lacked the information they needed. Malika and Jones weren't going to tell her anything useful. They needed a new plan.

Dexx sat in a chair, his feet spread, his elbows on his knees, his eyes glazed.

Paige leaned against the table, not even seeing the files in front of her. "I'm done waiting." The words practically exploded from her.

Dexx raised his numbed gaze from the floor. "Yeah. Me too. You have something special in mind?"

Paige stared through him. "Tail. Follow someone. But who do we tail? Who do we stake out? How's Sven attached to Jones or Malika?"

"Right. All of that."

She slapped her hands against her legs and stood up. "We need to find where their hangout is." She grabbed her over-shirt and motioned for Dexx.

"Hmm." Dexx followed her out of the inn. "Okay. So, where do we start?"

Paige thought about it until they reached Dexx's car. "Malika's house?"

"If she's in lockup, what are we going to see?" Dexx leaned against Jackie's roof. "It's been combed over pretty good. There's no evidence left to collect. If there's anyone left to tail, that's probably the last place they'd go. It's a straw and you're grasping."

“All of our options are straws. The last place we’d look is the best place to hide. Maybe someone will show up, lead us to Sven.”

“By sheer will or bad luck?”

She took in the bright blue sky, ignoring the humid heat. She’d finally started to become acclimated. Dang it. She didn’t *want* to get acclimated. “Would you prefer staring at the same old notes and getting nowhere, or pretend we’re doing some good, pray for a little good luck, and get nowhere somewhere else?”

“You have a wonderful way with debate. Fine. Whatever. I’ve followed worse, anyway.” He disappeared into the car.

Paige slid into the passenger seat.

“All right. So what do we do if we run into a demon? Or Sven? Or something else that isn’t either.”

As if Sven weren’t a demon.

Dexx turned the key. Jackie rumbled to life. He put her in gear and guided her to the blacktop road leading to town. “Do you have a plan on how to handle that?”

“Actually, yes. Back before Grandma found out I summoned demons, she taught Leslie and me how to use earth magicks. Once I discovered my gifts, I didn’t use them as much. I didn’t really need to.”

Dexx raised his eyebrows. “I’m waiting for the awesome part of this plan.”

He could be such a douche. “Demons use a different sort of magick, something from the dimension they’re from.”

“This is starting to sound like ten kinds of science fiction.”

“Call it whatever you like, but the idea of multiple dimensions has been hypothesized for thousands of years.”

“Wow. You just got nerdy. I think I’m turned on.”

She rolled her eyes.

Dexx drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Okay, so hell is like

another Earth?"

"Kind of, I guess. I don't know. When I see a demon, they feel different, but not in a way that's easy to pin down. More like how a song turns creepy when sung in a minor key."

"Wow. Where'd that come from?"

Paige sighed as they came to a stop sign. "I was on Facebook. Someone posted a version of 'Every Breath You Take' done in, I don't know, some minor key. It was creepy. Just creepy and cool and…off."

"Interesting." Dexx stared in his rearview.

Paige glanced at him. "What's wrong?"

"We've picked up a tail." He smiled and let off the gas.

"Anyone we know?"

"Brian." Dexx pulled onto the shoulder and parked Jackie under a tree, rolling down the window. After a few minutes, Paige heard the sound of footsteps. "What's up, Chief?"

Brian set his hand on the door. "The car behind you is your detail. Don't lose them."

Paige rubbed her cheek. "Remind me what good they're going to be against a demon?"

He raised an eyebrow, thumped the car door, and walked away.

Dexx clucked his tongue. "All business, that one."

She shrugged.

"Good. I'm happier." Dexx put Jackie in gear and accelerated sedately away.

"Seriously?"

"Help in any form is help."

"No, it isn't. Sometimes, help is just fodder." Her heart sank with the weight of that truth.

Silence filled the car.

"What were we talking about before Brian?" Dexx asked.

Paige spread her open hands. “Don’t remember.”

“Because we were just talking about it a second ago?”

“Brian was a huge interruption. Also, the car tailing us has a human who’s probably going to end up dead because of us.”

“Thank you, glass-half-empty.”

“Don’t get me wrong. Fodder’s how a good zombie apocalypse team survives.”

His expression twisted in incredulity. “Are you kidding me? Zombie apocalypse shows up, and your survival plan is fodder?”

“I gotta be realistic. Yes. I can fight. But there are a lot of people who will plain refuse. Why waste the life? Use it as a good defense.”

He passed the turnoff to the Metley Plantation. “You realize, of course, you’re just making it harder on yourself, because now you have that many more zombies to kill.”

“Only if they find me.”

Dexx turned down a residential street. “You are *twisted*.”

Paige chuckled. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d bantered for the purpose of having nothing else to say. Sometimes, the stupid, boring moments really were the best.

Dexx followed a one-lane paved road. “So, do you stock up on weapons first, or food?”

“All I have to do is make it home. The weapons and food are there.”

“Seriously?”

“Hey, when the CDC comes up with a zombie plan, it’s serious. Yeah, I’m gonna pay attention.”

He shot her a disbelieving look out of the corner of his eye. “No joking?”

“In my defense, most of it wasn’t gathered for the zombie apocalypse. I have weapons. Comes with the business.”

“The business of being a cop.”

“Yeah. Shut it.” Most cops had a gun or two. She had…well, she had an arsenal of other weapons. A compound bow, a crossbow, a hatchet, and a lot of knives. “The food kind of happened. I buy things on sale, which means I usually buy too much. And then I forget about it, or choose something easier, something frozen.”

A low, dry chuckle escaped him. “Oh, boy. Pea, this is a side I’ve never seen before. I think I might be more scared of you than zombies.”

“I’m not bad to have on a zombie-hunting team.”

“Until you decide I’m fodder.”

She laughed and shook her head. “A demon hunter? Fodder? Right.”

The trees disappeared, revealing a small outcropping of houses. They drove down a couple of streets before Dexx parked Jackie. Malika’s little blue house sat nestled down the street. They watched for several minutes, saying nothing.

Paige took off her seatbelt.

Dexx turned toward her. “What’s going on with us?”

“What?” Startled, she twisted to see him better. “I don’t—I don’t know.”

“Tell me I’m not the only one—I mean, we have a connection.”

Oh, dear God. They were having that conversation. Shit. She was awful at relationships. She’d fallen in love once, with Leah’s father. But when he’d died in the car accident, she’d never been interested in entering another relationship. Until Dexx. Jesus. What did she want to do with him? “Yeah. I enjoy being with you.”

“I feel better with you around.”

She narrowed her gaze and focused her attention on the gear shift. “I appreciate the fact I can tell you anything.”

“You don’t, though. You’re really not good with saying things that really matter to you.”

She tipped her head to the side. “I tell you more than I do anyone

else."

"So, why can't we have sex?"

Paige blinked. "Blunt."

"End of the day, I'm still me."

"Right. Um, well, uh, for me, things would get complicated." Fact of the matter was, she did want to have sex with him. But he was her partner.

"What's complicated about sex?" He placed his knee on the seat between them, the leather squeaking under his shifting weight. "We're together a lot. I find you attractive. I've seen how you look at me when you think I'm not paying attention."

She winced. "Can't deny it." Didn't mean she knew what she wanted to do with him, though. She didn't. On the one hand, she wanted to keep things the way they were. She liked what they had. On the other hand, gawd-dang, the man was sexy. She wanted to eat him alive.

"Right. So…" He narrowed his eyes, his crow's feet crinkling into place. "We could work, Pea. Think about it. You're a demon summoner."

"You're a hunter." She let out a puff of breath.

The car filled with silence.

"We work pretty well together."

Which was part of the problem. "We sure do."

"Friends with benefits could be hugely beneficial."

"Casual benefits." She didn't know what she thought of that. Mostly, she was pretty sure she couldn't do that. She wasn't a casual sex kind of person. Well, not that she'd ever given it much of a chance.

"You're not the kind of woman who needs romanced, are you?"

"What do you mean, I don't need romanced? Candles, paying for dinner, daisies, opening the door, those are nice."

"Yeah, but—" His eyes widened. "You're not serious, are you?"

"I'm not the kind of girl you generally pick up at the bar. I'm

intense…mostly intense."

"Trust me. I noticed."

"I'm not impressed by your devilish smile, or that sexy gleam in your eye." No. She totally had been. "I don't give a rip about your ass."

"You're a liar. Are you looking for a relationship, then? How would your job feel about our affair?"

Being married to her job might have complications, but maybe? "Seriously, shut it. Good grief."

"You don't think so? When was the last time you thought of doing anything other than work?"

She pursed her lips in thought. He had a point.

"Even though your memories were stripped, you sought emotional refuge in work. Now, you're a workaholic."

"Let me guess. There's a drug for that."

"Yes." Dexx widened his hands, his expression open. "Sex."

She barked a laugh. "Does it come in a pill?"

He pushed his lips out, his eyebrows raised. "It comes from the sugar on my lips."

She burst into a fit of giggles. "Oh my God."

"I'm being serious."

She regained her composure and studied Malika's house.

Dexx grinned in silence.

Something moved in the thick bushes separating Malika's yard from her neighbor's. "What was that?"

"What was what?" He pushed himself up in his seat.

It moved again. "There."

"Where?"

"In the bushes. Something's moving."

"Is there a genie or something here we should know about?"

She frowned at him in question.

“We wished for some luck.”

“It could be anyone.” She leaned her hands against the dashboard, getting as close as she could, hoping for a better viewpoint.

A man stepped out of the bushes, tall and muscular in his black jeans and raggedy T-shirt. His blond, short hair shone in the brilliant sun as he stood before them. A sick smile graced his lips as he mouthed something she couldn’t understand.

“Sven.”

Chapter 46

Dexx's eyebrows rose in alarm. "You're kidding me. Sven? That's him?"

Not that Paige really recalled what his human form looked like, but her soul rang with his name. "Yeah."

"Okay. Time for your plan. Bring on the earth magick."

It had been more a theory. Less a plan.

Dexx started for the door.

Sven raised his arms high over his head, his voice almost audible as he called out to them.

Dizziness attacked Paige.

Time stilled.

Brown leaves swirled in a spiraling dance in front of her. A piece of construction paper slowly sailed by on the wind. Dexx moved in snail-like motion as he pushed his door open.

Paige tried to yell at him.

No sound emerged.

She tried to move, to grab him.

Her body wouldn't budge.

White hot energy shot through the windshield, the glass rippling with the intense heat. Power from deep in her flowed out, wrapping around her, dark and damp, with a musty tang. Where it had been and what it was doing now was beyond her. What the hell? Somehow she blocked most of the spell he'd speared at them, at her.

With a force of iron will, she grabbed Dexx's hand and pulled him back in the car. "*Go*."

Sven tipped his blond head, a sick smile sliding into place.

The world blanked as the energies pulsed.

"What's going on? Are you okay?"

Taking a step toward her, Sven's expression turned feral.

Her eyes hurt. "We. Have. To. Go."

Jackie roared to life, jammed into gear, and roared as the pedal smashed against the floor. She instantly turned around with a haze of smoke, but that's as far as she got. Tires squealed, the engine roared with intent, but as the smoke thickened, they didn't move forward an inch.

Her shields slipped. Her gift leapt, clawing, ripping, tearing its way out of her, reaching, grasping, stretching toward the stranger. It pulled. It called. A single name issued forth.

Sven took a staggering step forward.

Then it happened.

She had his true name and with it came a plethora of information. After being slain two hundred years before, he'd been born again after the first World War. He'd grown up in Queens. He'd had friends, watched them all die. Then, on the eve of his own death as an old man, a knowledge had blossomed within him.

He was a demon, and a very dangerous one.

Something seeped inside, pushed at her, shredding her soul, her very existence. A thick, oily sludge blanketed her. Her breath quickened as she put more effort into staying in her body, maintaining control. Sweat broke out on her brow. She folded in her seat, concentrating on just staying…her.

She gritted her teeth. "Dexx. Go."

Sven lowered his head, his arms spread as his lip curled.

Smoke rolled around them. Jackie struggled to break free. She rumbled and roared but didn't move.

Let me in. Let me see him.

Paige dug her nails into the leather seat.

Jackie roared.

Something pushed at Paige, like someone's hand inside her chest.

She deflected it with every ounce of will she had.

The foreign force stopped.

Sven's beautiful face glowed.

Her gift flared. Names rose to her lips.

"Mammon, Shax, Abaddon." Her voice was so distant. "Rise. I need you."

From the smoke of Jackie's tires, three bodies materialized.

Jackie ceased her struggle, her motor purring as she faced off against the demons.

Dexx's chest rose and fell as he wrung the steering wheel. "Pea, what's going—"

One of the demons stumbled forward, his arms flung wide. Surprise and shock raced across his expression.

Dexx pushed himself as far back in his seat as he could manage.

Something inside her slid, went sideways.

A stick crashed against Jackie's door.

Then the demon flew toward Jackie, crashing into her windshield, his face plastered against the cracked glass. His fingers stretched. His bloodied mouth moved. His black eyes glazed.

His soul permeated her existence. He pushed at her, tearing at her, making room for him within her body.

A wild roar burst from her.

The body plastered to the windshield disappeared, leaving only smears of blood in its place. Molten heat sizzled along the glass, melting the cracked edges back together.

She stared through eyes that weren't her own, fought for control of lips that refused to obey her commands. One thought shot through her.

Not again.

Names flew from her mouth, names she didn't know.

Bodies appeared around them. Men, flexing their hands, hopping in place, preparing for battle.

Shit. Shit.

"Hey, demon," Dexx shouted.

Paige—the demon—turned to him and snarled.

Dexx retrieved a canteen from the driver's side door and splashed water over her.

The demon screamed, releasing an ethereal roar from Paige's throat.

Now was her chance. She had to move. She gathered her strength and pushed.

The damned demon didn't even budge.

"Come on, Pea."

Strong fingers wrapped around her, raising her out of her pained existence. A sword of light slammed through her. The demon screamed, shrinking away from the pain, his presence shriveling. Her soul stretched, filled her fingers, filled her toes. She opened her eyes.

What the fuck?

A blinding light erupted over the scene, cascading around them.

The demons roared as one.

Shivers ran down Paige's spine. She stood outside of the car, her legs wobbly.

What in the hell was going on? How did she get out of the car?

Dexx stared at her through the passenger window. He reached for the door.

She waved him away.

He ignored her, pulling at the handle, pushing at the door.

It didn't move.

She felt a presence large and awe-inspiring. She looked around.

A man stood immediately behind her, wearing a white suit with a blue tie.

She craned her neck, taking a step back. His head blotted out the sun, rays of light streaming around him like a crown.

He gripped her arm, holding her close, engulfing her in warmth. Hope attacked her defenses. “Call Xael.”

“Who?” Her voice came out in a squeak.

The man surveyed the gathering crowd. “I cannot call him and cannot deal with these as should be done.” His heavy gaze landed on her. “Call Xael.”

“No.”

He shook her. “Call him.”

“Who is he?” She knew. Xael. She’d heard the name before. An angel. A damned angel. No. She wasn’t playing. No.

Sven popped his neck and flexed his fingers.

“He can fight these vermin.”

Paige attempted to step away. Rachel played with angels. Paige wanted no part of them.

He didn’t allow it. “I offer protection, guidance—”

“I don’t want help from an angel.”

Sven reached out with his hand and twisted.

Paige crumpled to the ground under the force of his power.

The angel knelt beside her. “I cannot fight them and defend you. You must call Xael.”

Three demons attacked Jackie.

The car let out a battle cry as Dexx mashed his foot on the accelerator.

“He’s better at this type of battle. Paige.”

Paige struggled to rise to her feet, to help Dexx. Her legs wouldn’t obey. Something pressed against her, demanding entrance.

The angel’s jaw ticked. “Please.”

She didn't have much more time to think about it. Sven was nearly in and once there, he could push her out, take control of her gifts. She reached toward her power, grabbed hold, and called. "Xael. I need you."

The moment stilled. Jackie paused, one tire raised off the ground. A demon crouched, preparing to toss her. Sven's head tipped to the side, watching her with keen interest. The other demons froze in position, poses ready for battle.

A blinding white light enveloped them all. If Paige could have moved, she would have shielded her eyes, but she was just as frozen as everyone else. A crash of thunder cracked across the residential street.

And a man appeared, kneeling in the middle of a shallow crater. He stood, his arms flexing, and for one moment, Paige saw the shadow of his wings against the light.

He turned toward her, realigning his grey pinstriped suit jacket and red tie. He nodded toward the angel beside her.

She had one glorious oh-shit moment before the time freeze relented. Chaos ensued. A gunshot rent the air. A demon roared in pain. Another grunted. Dexx hit one demon with his car, bounced it off with a metallic clank on the hood.

The demons stopped mid-action and turned to Paige, the archangel, and the newcomer.

"What did you do?" Sven asked, straightening.

Paige didn't even get a chance to shake her head.

Xael reached inside her chest, grabbed hold of her gift, and sent the demons back one at a time. Pleasure and pain crashed together, driving the breath out of her. She felt seared to the bone, and tingles that lasted for years.

Sven retreated several steps as the angel's attention turned to him. "I have the key."

Xael's lips twisted along with the hand in Paige's chest. "I care not,

vermin.”

Power raced from her. She couldn’t breathe through the overwhelming pain converging with pleasure.

Sven didn’t budge.

Xael squeezed harder.

Her head fell back. A scream of silence issued forth.

Sven took a step back. A shocked smile graced his lips. “Next time, boys.” He disappeared in a cloud of white smoke.

Xael released her with a curse, saying something she couldn’t comprehend.

Strong arms caught her, held her close. Soft words whispered against her ear.

Darkness overtook her.

Chapter 47

Paige woke to blood-boiling nausea. Stumbling along, she managed not to fall. She fought the urge to throw up. Or scream. Either one sounded great at the moment.

Raphael.

She closed her eyes and tried to pull away.

“Do not fight me, child,” the archangel said. A chair slid across the floor. “Sit down. Your stomach will be fine in a moment.”

Paige sagged into the wooden chair. “Where are—” The smells, the bright, cheery interior brought back childhood memories. Realization halted her words.

“We thought to bring you to a place you felt safe.” Raphael kept his attention focused straight ahead of him. “You feel safe here.”

Alma’s kitchen. Pain knocked on her heart, reminding of her of the times before the betrayal. “Used to feel safe here.” She rose. “I need to get back.”

“There are too many.”

Xael leaned against the wooden island. He took a green apple from the silver pot sitting beside him. “You worry too much, Raphael.”

The archangel’s jaw clenched.

“Les?” Alma called from the front of the house. “Is that you?”

“Oh, crap.” Paige kept her eye on the door. “That’s my grandmother.”

Raphael frowned at her. “I know who she is, child.”

“Don’t ‘child’ me,” Paige snapped. “Get us out of here!”

Xael raised a single eyebrow, taking a step toward her.

Alma stepped into the room. She halted, her white gaze bewildered. “Paige, what are—”

The kitchen disappeared and pain took its place. Paige's blood boiled. Her limbs threatened to split from her body. A new setting materialized around her.

This time, she did throw up.

"Xael." Raphael's tone dripped condescension. "What have you done?"

The other angel held up a hand and munched on his apple. "You might want to look after your charge."

Paige looked up at them both from the grass. They'd materialized on the shore near Fanny's inn. The sun sank toward the horizon, setting the world around her in a wash of reds and pinks. "Please." She wiped her mouth. Her stomach told her it was empty. Awesome. "Continue to ignore me."

"Why have you brought us here?" Raphael reached for her arm.

Paige scrambled away from him on all fours. Slowly, she pushed herself to her feet a safe distance away. "I've had enough with the angel bus. We're not going anywhere unless there's a different form of 'ranspor'ation."

"The hunter comes." Xael's eyes went dead.

Paige touched her lips. Her mouth had gone numb. "Wha' 'id you 'o to me?"

Xael's bland expression folded in confused disgust. "You'll be fine."

Jackie's wonderful rumble filled the air accompanied by the sound of flying gravel.

"I believe we owe them answers, Raphael."

"We owe them nothing." The archangel watched the car's approach.

Dust rose in Jackie's wake. Gravel crunched as Dexx put on the brakes. He flew out of the car and ran toward them. "Paige."

She limped toward Dexx. First her mouth, now her legs? The entire right side of her was numb. Had she suffered a stroke?

He wrapped her in his arms, putting his body between her and the

angels. “What’s wrong? Why the limp?”

“My s’omach’s affecting my ’egs.”

“And your mouth’s broke?”

“Her body will be fine,” Xael said. “Traveling with angels is somewhat discomforting to humans. Currently, her nervous system is not working properly. It will right itself.”

Dexx pulled away to give Paige an are-you-shitting-me look.

“Eventually.”

“We should not be here,” Raphael said.

“She’s your charge.” Xael walked toward Paige and Dexx. “Your job is to protect her—”

“As I was trying to do.”

“—not hide her.”

“Pro’ect me?” Paige raised her head. Her tongue felt as though it were three times its original size. “From wha’?”

Raphael’s lips tightened.

Xael sent him a suffering smile. “The child needs to know.”

“The child needs—”

“—instruction, like those before her.”

Raphael straightened, his angular face brightening. His jaw muscles ticked.

Dexx tightened his hold on her. “Neither one of you is making any sense. If you don’t have a point or purpose for being here, maybe you could leave. Leaving would be nice.”

Paige pushed out of Dexx’s arms and stumbled toward the inn. Her limbs were too heavy. It was exhausting to breathe. She needed a nap. A long one. “If what you have to say goes along something like, ‘You need to find your way back to the Lord,’ you can stuff it.” She nearly toppled over. “Hey, I can talk again.”

“Hey.” Dexx took her arm. “Congrats. Now, if your legs would work.”

“Shut up.”

“Stop,” Raphael commanded.

Paige was in no mood to be commanded. She’d just hared off in search of Sven, found Sven, and had been nearly overtaken by demons and Sven. She still had no idea where the frelling key was. If that wasn’t bad enough, some monkey-jerk of an asshole angel had shoved his freaking hand into her chest to use her gift. She wasn’t in the fucking mood.

Xael released a long sigh.

Paige’s head smacked into an invisible wall, followed closely by her foot, then her entire body. “What the—”

Dexx used his fingers to test the limits of this new obstacle. His fingertips whitened as he pressed against it. “It’s solid.”

Paige stood up a little straighter and faced Xael. “All right. In thirty words or less. I need a nap.”

The angel stared at some point above her head with his pitch-black eyes. “He created the demon talkers. It’s his job to keep you safe and to instruct you in the ways of the demon talkers. He—”

“Your thirty words are up,” Dexx interrupted.

Xael’s expression went flat. “I had six more.”

Paige held up her hand, staring at Raphael. “Hold up. You created demon summoners?”

The archangel gnashed his teeth, looking away. “Demon talkers. Never summoners.”

“Okay. Then if you created me, then why did the angels help my mother take Leah?”

“You misused your gift,” Raphael said fiercely. “This is not what I created your line for.”

What a pompous…*asshat*! She crossed her arms over her chest. “I misused my gift? I misused my gift? Huh, right. Okay. Then what did

you create us for?"

"You realize," Dexx said, clenching his fist, his expression neutral, "that you're inviting him into a conversation that's well *over* thirty words long."

She quirked her lips at him. What little patience she'd had was long gone. Her leg tingled with sensation. She applied her full weight to it. Angel travel. Never again.

"Also," Dexx continued, "that tone of voice? Danger, Will Robinson. Tread carefully."

Thunder rolled over Raphael's angular features. "I created you to control the demons, not to summon them. Not to let them loose. They are to be punished and used as I will it."

A chuckle burst out of her. She twisted away, letting her arms fall to her sides. "Oh. Oh. Oof. Oh. Oh, man. Wow. Shit. Wow." Laughter bubbled forth as she rounded on him. "As—oh-ho. As he wills it. Oh, man. So, I'm a shovel."

Dexx took a step back, raising a finger at Raphael. "I warned you."

"But she laughs." Xael's brow furrowed in confusion.

"False advertisement. Trust me. She's pissed. *Pissed.* Stop saying stupid things."

"Why?" Raphael flexed his shoulders, shadows of his wings popping into existence. "She is a woman. I fear no one."

Dexx took another step back. "Your death wish, dude."

Paige ran her tongue in her cheek, allowing Dexx's banter to continue, to buy her time to figure out what she needed to say. What did she need to know? This entire time, her entire life, she thought she was a byproduct of demony stuff, but now? A tool for the angels? Really? She opened her mouth, pinching the corners together with her thumb and forefinger, before releasing them with a pop. "You mean my great-grandmother was a spy for the angels? Is that why she went insane?"

“It is not easy to be the demon talker,” Raphael said. “It was never meant to be.”

Paige’s lips rounded.

“Each time a demon talker came into existence,” Xael said, crossing his arms over his chest, “he would send one of us to instruct. Usually me.”

Paige shook her head. “So why didn’t you come to me? Why didn’t you tea—”

“I did,” Raphael said through gritted teeth.

“I think I’d remember.”

“Why do you question me?”

“Why?” The question exploded from her chest. “Why? My life was ruined because of you, because of your stupid need to fuck with my life, because I wasn’t good enough—”

“You are not.”

Paige stopped in shocked surprise.

Dexx’s lip curled. “You want to repeat that?”

“You became an agent of the enemy,” the archangel said, his voice calm. “You sided with them, worked with them. Gabriel and the Lady Rachel are well within their rights to protect Leah.”

Gabriel and the *Lady* Rachel? “To destroy my life because you failed me?”

The archangel flinched.

“Why? How?”

“Why?” Xael asked. “Why did we decide to use humans who are obviously inferior?”

That wasn’t the why she’d asked, but it was a good one anyway. She balled her anger into her fists and ground her teeth.

“Demons use the pathway to the soul,” Xael said.

Dexx raised his eyebrows. “And, what, you can’t?”

“We—” Xael ran his tongue along his lower lip. “We do not.”

“Wow.” Paige bared her teeth and concentrated on the lake behind the angels. “Now I see why you’re so jealous of the demons.”

Xael smiled in surprise. “Jealous?”

“Humans are weak.” Raphael’s eyes flared, a golden light shining through for a single moment. “We have other agents inside. Having a human demon talker is merely convenient. As long as she remains convenient.”

Paige didn’t miss the gender emphasis. “What made Grandma go insane?”

“As with your grandmother and her grandmother before her.” Raphael clasped his hands in front of him. “We give you a choice. Seek redemption for your defects by working for us or suffer consequences.”

Paige choked on her own spit. “Defects?”

Raphael’s lip curled in disgust. “Why do you think you were chosen? You, child, were born wrong.”

Chapter 48

Paige's eyebrows jumped. "Born wrong? In which way? The fact I was born human? Or the fact I was born a woman? Or are you talking about my gift?" Her voice rose along with her anger at each question. "Like the one you *gave* me?"

Raphael stumbled a half-step backward as though slammed by an invisible force. His calm veneer didn't alter.

Xael gave the archangel a look of supreme serenity. "The hunter warned you."

The archangel narrowed his eyes.

Paige's hands shook with rage. "I want you gone. Now. I can't—" She pressed her fist to her lips.

Dexx touched her shoulder. "Pea—"

She threw him off with a feral growl. "Everything that's happened to me is your fault."

"No," Raphael said. "It is yours."

Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"If you had followed our way, none of this would have happened."

She shook her head, staring at him dumbstruck.

"You had to have known the path you chose was wrong."

"All I know," Paige said, her body quivering, "is that this moment feels wrong."

"It is because of the guilt. Repent, and you may live within the grace we offer."

"Repent? For what? For loving my daughter?" She took a step toward the angels.

Raphael staggered a step backward.

“For having morals?”

He raised his chin, losing more ground.

“For trying to use my gift for good?”

Raphael held up an open palm and surged forward. “As soon as you learned they were demons, you should have known you were wrong.”

“Bullshit,” Paige shouted, advancing another half-step. “They were here for me. Taught me, made a friend in me. They make more sense than you!”

“Of course they do.” Raphael flicked his hand.

An outside force swept across Paige’s mind like a blanket of calm. Was he seriously trying to pull some sort of angel Jedi mind crap on her right now?

Raphael’s eyes widened minutely as he studied her, realization dawning along his features. “Demons are charming to sway you. That is what makes them so dangerous.”

“Demons do—”

“Did the Book tell you nothing?”

“How much stock should I put—” Two more steps. “—in the mangled words of men?”

The archangel raised his head as though he’d been slapped.

“Where’s God’s word in that? How many times has it been twisted to suit the needs of the power-hungry? Where are the original texts? How do we even know what your Book *really* said?”

“We gave man those words to—”

“—to seek power for yourselves,” Paige finished.

“We warned man not to worship us.”

“That’s not what this conversation sounds like to me.”

“We’ve got company.” Xael straightened, his arms falling to his sides.

Paige twisted around. Lucius and Balnore stood on the other side of the invisible wall.

“It would do you well to leave us, vermin,” Raphael said.

“You’d do well to leave,” Balnore said. A cold smile slid across his face. “Unless you like it when I send you back.”

Xael folded his arms over his chest. “He’s the one who stopped you? The one you called to do your bidding and refused?”

Balnore’s smile widened, and he flicked his dark eyebrows.

Xael stared at the demon with something akin to wonder. “Who are you?”

“I am her protector.”

“Interesting.”

The archangel flexed his shoulders. “You cannot send us back.”

“Give me one reason why—”

Raphael cut the demon off. “We are the only ones who can truly protect her.”

Balnore’s beady black gaze settled on Paige.

“She is broken and of no use to you.” Raphael didn’t seem to realize the condescension he poured over Paige.

Paige glared at Balnore and shook her head.

His hands opened at his side, his eyes flaring.

“She is, however,” Raphael continued, “of use to us.”

Balnore turned his cold gaze to the archangel, standing at his full height.

“She cannot be around a lesser demon without sucking them into her body for possession.” Raphael clicked his tongue. “How many times do you think she can survive that?”

“As many as she has to.”

“I can protect her.” Lucius stepped forward. “Now, get out of here before I command my brethren to send you back.”

Raphael grinned lopsidedly. “What brethren? They are gone, all of them.”

“Found ’em.” Lucius gave the angel a smug look.

The archangel focused on Paige, his expression sliding into disgust. “Repent.”

She released an explosive breath. “Like hell.”

“Repent, and all will be forgiven.”

The nerve of this guy. “I don’t like your God, if *He* even exists.”

“Leave.” Balnore lowered his chin, his expression darkening. “Now.”

“If you change your mind, sinner,” the archangel said, “pray. We will arrive.”

“Pray to who?” Paige asked.

“Who do you think you should pray to?”

She raised an eyebrow. “I’d rather spend an eternity in hell.”

Xael’s mouth quirked. “Only we can protect you. You do not know what that demon is. Return to us, and we can grant you gifts beyond your simple understanding of what you have. Do not let the evil cloud your mind.”

“If you have to stoop to bribery and coercion, I think I know who my true friends are. Go away.”

The angels regarded her, then looked to each other. Balnore’s eyes continued to flare, magickal energy crackling at his open hands. The invisible field around them disappeared. As did the angels.

Paige released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and clasped Dexx’s arms.

“We have a problem,” Balnore said.

Dexx snorted. “And the understatement award of the year goes to?”

The demon glared at the hunter.

Dexx sent him a cheeky grin. “So, what’s the issue now?”

“Sven,” Lucius said, his mouth twisting.

Balnore rolled his eyes. “He’s been among the humans too long. He’s half human now.”

“Like Lucius?” Paige needed sleep. S.L.E.E.P. “How’s that a problem?”

“It means you can’t banish him, love,” Lucius said. “Even if we did get ya back in working order.”

“Great. We’ll just kill him.” Dexx took out his Smith and Wesson. “That means this works now.”

“Not so fast,” Lucius said. “He’s only half human.”

“So this”—Dexx said, waving his gun before stashing it back in his belt—“won’t work.”

“It might wound him, but not kill him.”

Paige folded her arms over her chest. “Good news is, we have Lucius, who we can use as a test subject.”

“I don’t find you humorous, love.”

She gave him a fuck-off expression and mocked his accent. “I don’t think I care, love.”

“Great,” Dexx said. “So how do we fight him?”

Lucius stared a hole in the back of Balnore’s head. “You do not.”

“Oh, come on,” Dexx said. “This guy’s gotta have weaknesses.”

Balnore looked up at him. “Paige.”

Paige bit her lip and shook her head, too tired and too overwhelmed to follow the conversation emotionally.

Dexx frowned in confusion. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

Paige raised her eyebrows. “Love notes via dead body. Come on, Dexx.”

“Also,” Lucius added, “the souls he has destroyed are now attached to him. I would guess he’s losing his nut. Blood magick does that to humans.”

They needed a miracle. “Insanity doesn’t help us.”

“He has the powers of a demon and a human.” Dexx held up his finger. “Like that of a demon talker. You—when you work right—are a very powerful person. Now, he’s like you, only not broken.”

“And insane. Awesome.” The sun left the sky, shooting pale rays above Dexx’s head. “So how do we stop him?”

“Stake through the heart?” Dexx asked. “If Lucius is like him, I vote we test-drive the stake theory right away.”

“It is unlikely he has a heart,” Lucius said. “And we are not practicing on me.”

“He was reborn before the first World War,” Paige said. “He regained his demon abilities when he died of natural causes.”

“And how do you know that?” Dexx demanded.

“Back in town.” Paige released a tired sigh. “We connected. A lot happened.”

“Beheading, then.” Dexx gestured to Balnore. “Fire?”

“I think,” Balnore said, “the demon hunter might be on to something.”

“Really?” Dexx asked. “I am?”

Balnore nodded.

Dexx snorted Paige a cheap grin.

She jutted her chin to the side. “What are you thinking?”

“Chakras,” Balnore said.

Dexx frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“Chakras,” Paige said, letting her hands fall to her sides. “We could puncture one of his chakras with…” She trailed off and shook her head. “Nothing physical. That wouldn’t work.”

“Nothing wholly physical,” Balnore said, his eyes lighting on hers.

“Something physical to harm his body, and something magick to harm his demon soul.” Paige thumped her thumb against her leg. “That could work.”

“But it’d be a magick only you could perform,” Lucius said.

“Now, wait.” Paige pressed her fingers along her lips. “You walked out of that jail cell pretty cocky. Said you had my earth magick. Said we couldn’t touch you. That basically means you’re like me, too.”

“I’m not magickal. Yes. You gave me your earth magick, but that just means I can’t be trapped. The only thing I’m good for is a fight. With my hands.”

Well, shit. She hadn’t cast in more than five years and she was their best chance?

They were so screwed.

Chapter 49

Paige was done having angels and demons railroaded up her ass. She was sick and tired of having shit happen. It was time to take control.

She had to come up with a weapon that was physical, but also magickal, and the best being demon magick. Earthly and ethereal.

She followed Dexx back to the inn, racking her brain. Quick, easy. Something she could whip up quickly for immediate action.

This had to end tonight. The killings *had* to end. The gate had to remain closed. She had to ensure the angels had zero reason to interfere in her life ever again.

She paused on the step leading to the front door of the inn and drummed her fingers against the white pillar supporting the porch roof.

Dexx came up around her and leaned against the banister, so close his body heat penetrated her thin shirt. “Bullets.”

Paige bit both her lips before she spoke. She’d never made bullets. “How do we get the magick on them?”

He lifted one shoulder. “Your department.”

“His knife is dripping with demon magicks,” Balnore said.

“Right, but I didn’t actually have anything to do with that. I found it this way. But, oh, shit. Wait. My knife.”

The light dawned. “We already *have* our weapon.”

Balnore shrugged. “It’s possible. Though, do we want to wager our lives on it?”

“I want this over tonight.”

“You’re being a bit hasty, love.”

“Would you stop calling me love?”

Lucius's face curled up in frustration. "It's a manner of speaking."

"I don't care." She turned to Dexx. "How soon can you be ready?"

"Plan?" the hunter asked.

"No plan. Just end this shit now."

"Bad plan."

"Who cares?"

"Those who'd prefer to remain among the living. Bal's right. You're being hasty."

She ground her teeth. "I'm tired of fucking playing. I'm tired of being played with. I'm tired of these asshats thinking I'm a freaking meat-suit toy!"

"Let's think about this." Dexx set his hands on her shoulders. The wind rippled his loose blue T-shirt. "This isn't like you."

"Yeah, well, being 'like me' hasn't helped much." She pushed past him, evading Balnore as well.

"So now it's time to be an idiot?" Balnore asked, following her through the door.

Dexx's tongue clicked, but nothing spilled out.

Paige unlocked her room and stepped inside. "Will somebody give me something we can do?"

"Fine." Lucius halted in the middle of the room. "I may not be magickal the same way you are, but I can provide a shield. You may not like it, but in the same manner you provided me."

Paige pursed her open lips, scrambling to recall. When she did, she snorted. "You were possessing me, and you fucking hid behind me."

"I admit, not my finest hour. I thought I could intimidate you when… other means failed. I must apologize for that. Now, I believe I can do something similar, if you trust me, without possessing you."

"That would be great."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Dexx stared at her like she'd

grown a second nose. “This is a *bad* idea.”

Paige held her hands palms up at shoulder level. “Come up with a better one. We need to go find Sven. He’s probably using demons as a shield like he did in town. He crawled into me, Dexx. He used my gift to summon.”

“Ew.” Dexx clanked his front teeth together. “Well, shit. We need to test to see if his idea will even work.”

With a sigh, Paige stood in front of Lucius. “Okay. Shield me.”

Lucius winced. “It was a brilliant plan inside my head.”

“Then get it outside your head. That’s where we need it.” She crouched, reaching deep inside herself where her powers resided. “Bal, I’m attacking you.”

“Oh, great,” he said. “So I get to defend myself from you. How thrilling.”

Paige rubbed her nose and glared at him.

Lucius shook out his shoulders and closed his eyes.

It was as if she’d put on noise-canceling headphones. The edge, the irritation she’d felt ever since releasing Lucius from her body eased. Her nerves settled like the hairs on her arms. She swallowed and breathed.

She fueled the air with the power of her frustration and rage. Fire leapt in her hand. With a flick of her eyebrow, she hurled it at Balnore.

He waved his fingers and the fire evaporated into smoke. “Perhaps we shouldn’t play with fire in the inn. I doubt Fanny would appreciate it.”

Right. “Okay. Well, I can tell the shield’s there. It helps. I can concentrate. Did you feel the pull to possess me?”

The corners of his mouth drooped. “No. This is quite a relief.”

Lucius opened his eyes.

The edge crept back.

“It’s not easy, but I think I can keep it up as long as I can concentrate. I had hoped it to be easier.”

“Excellent.” Paige clapped her hands. “We have a weapon. We have a way to protect me. Now all we need is their location.”

Balnore stared at the ceiling. “I’m going to regret this, but we found him. Lucius and I did.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded.

“Next time, lead with that. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

Bal took in a deep breath, his lips flat. “You’re being reckless.”

“That’s my choice. Where are they?”

Bal looked away. “In a warehouse outside of town.”

“What are we waiting for?” She made a beeline for the door, hopping down the stairs. This was the best chance they’d had in days. She was eager for a little payback. They all piled into Jackie, Balnore and Lucius crammed in the back. At least they didn’t have Alma to snuggle against.

“So, do we have an address?” Dexx asked, the keys jingling as he put them in the ignition.

“There’s a large building,” Lucius said from the back seat.

“The old paper mill,” Balnore added. “They managed to cover their tracks very well. And there is no way of telling right now how many are in there.”

“The paper mill?” Paige asked. “Okay. So, large area. They’ll be inside. Lots of places for them to hide.”

“We could pause and plan better,” Balnore offered.

She sent Balnore a dirty look over the seat. “Or not.”

“We really should pause and make an executable plan. Reckless will kill. Do you not watch human movies?”

Dexx snorted, starting the car.

“Okay. Well, I’ll deport demons back to Hell. That should level the playing field. Then, we go after Sven. We need to end him and get that key.”

“Sounds achievable, if you have a plan to *make* your goal *achievable*,” Balnore said.

“And what will you be doing?” Paige asked.

Balnore was silent for a long moment as Jackie rumbled around them. “Staying not dead.”

Dexx took them out of town and down a highway Paige hadn’t been on before. Of course, it was dark, so who knew? Maybe she had. He parked in the tall weeds along the road.

The tall paper mill stood like an industrial zombie over a scene of broken pallets and rusted trash bin carcasses.

“Oh, look,” Dexx said, puffing his cheeks as he released a breath. “They left the light on for us.”

They had, which was great. Otherwise? Well, it would have been a bit more difficult.

Dexx got out and popped the trunk.

Paige joined him, thinking of the spells she could use, the magicks. “It’s been a long time since I did magick.”

“Oh-ho. This is going to be great.”

Paige shoved her hands in her back pockets and raked her teeth over her top lip. “Oh my God, yeah.”

He opened his mouth, but closed it. “Just do me a favor.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Don’t die until we’ve had sex.”

She snorted with laughter. “Really?”

“Really. Come on. I’m being serious.”

She tried to push the smile off her face, but failed. “It’s hard to tell with you.”

He gripped the sides of her face, his lips hovering over hers, all humor gone. “I’m being very serious, Paige. I want you. I need you. And if you die out there before I’ve even tasted you… well, that would be tragic on

a scale the world hasn't known since… humans."

Paige stared up at his shadowed face. "Dexx, I—"

"I know," he whispered. "But I don't care." He released her. "You die before we have sex, I'm bringing you back through a Voodoo priest."

Chapter 50

Dexx opened his duffle bag and passed out weapons. He thrust a sawed-off shotgun at Paige and stuffed several shells in her jeans pocket. “Try to remember this ain’t Hollywood. You try one-handing that damn thing and it’ll knock you on your ass and break your arm.”

“I know how to handle a gun, Dexx.”

He shrugged. “Be safe. Lucius, do you need schooling?”

“No.” Lucius took the gun twisting it back forth studying the semi-auto. “I don’t. Besides, what I really need to do is find a place to hide. If I’m using your toy, I’m not protecting Paige.”

“Good point.”

Balnore sighed at his gun. “Innocent people will die this way.”

Dexx shot him a look of consternation. “Are you *sure* you’re a demon? Anyone in there probably won’t be innocent. Not after a demon encounter.”

Paige took the ankle holster and gun Dexx offered her. She hoped she’d remember it in the heat of battle as she’d never trained with one. “Shoot to stun.”

“Bullets don’t stun, Pea,” Dexx said, slamming the trunk shut.

She sent him a dirty look and crossed the empty highway. “Aim for legs or arms. Shoot to wound.”

“When all else fails,” Dexx said, sending Balnore a tight smile, “just try hitting something. Preferably something not us."

Paige quirked her lips at the demon and jerked her chin in the direction of the mill. “Let’s go.”

They made it to the building, as quietly as one hunter, two demons and a city girl could make it. Dexx winced at every clump of grass

swished by feet plodding along.

He made a down motion as the four stopped behind a broken stack of pallets.

They didn't have much to hide behind, so stealth was out. Well, more *stealth* was out, but they didn't go to the plant for a recon mission.

The night was still, quiet. No birds. No insects. No animals.

Dexx leaned against the peeling white-painted wall. "Do you think anybody's home?"

"Balnore, how many did you see?"

"Many. Twenty or so, maybe more by now."

"If we're done chatting?" She got three nods. "Then let's go. Stay out of each other's lines of fire."

"Right." Dexx gestured with his gun. "Lucius? Try not to get too shot up, okay? Remember, you're her shield. Without her, we're fucked."

Lucius frowned in concentration. "I believe I understand. Paige is our main focus."

"Let's go." Paige put her hand to the door. It was heavy and old. A pile of dead leaves from the previous fall lay against it. If this really was the place, the demons obviously weren't using the front door. There was a slight groan as the door fought to remain still and then it gave with wild squeal.

A shout called out.

A gunshot echoed through the room, the bullet striking a wall somewhere.

"Shit!" Paige ducked behind the door. She peeked inside, flinching with each bullet. Cover. She needed cover. She raised her gun and ran in crouched toward a large metal desk. Glass rained over her. She slammed into the drawer side of the metal desk and grunted as the handles found her ribs.

The gunfire paused.

Dexx dropped and rolled, finding cover beside her. He sighted down the barrel of his gun around the corner of the desk. Orange flashes burned briefly from the end.

The sound of gunfire overwhelmed everything else. Paige tried to pierce the darkness of the huge room. Two lamps swayed overhead, casting weak light.

A woman screamed.

“Fuck me,” Dexx shouted. “I hate it when people shoot at me.”

A man roared and charged the desk, red blossoms of blood exploding from his chest, legs, and arms.

“If you’re going to do something,” Dexx shouted as he emptied his magazine into the still-advancing man, “now might be the best time.”

Paige peered over the desk and popped a couple of rounds into a woman running toward them. “I’m working on it.”

Dexx released the magazine and dug in his pocket for a fresh one. “Work faster.” He slammed it into place and continued to fire.

Concentration didn’t come easy. Harder to hear or see. Every time she stood up to protect her position, bullets whizzed a little too close and sent her scurrying back to her hiding place. Whatever her intentions were going in, she had no wish to die.

Lucius collapsed against the desk, his face going red. “We are vulnerable here. Hurry with the plan, please?”

“Balnore,” she shouted. She needed one moment. “Help.”

Dexx waved at Balnore, saying something Paige couldn’t hear, and ran for the line of bins. Mini explosions of trash ricocheted all around him. He hopped as he ran, shooting blindly at the din of orange flashes.

Someone shouted orders high above their heads.

Balnore stood in front of Paige, a bored expression on his face.

A man popped his neck and walked toward them.

Balnore raised his gun and pulled the trigger. “How long are we

supposed to keep this up?"

The sound of a semi-automatic ricocheted through the large room.

"Unfortunate," Balnore said, diving behind the desk and fingering his chest. "I liked this shirt."

"Shut up, show off." Paige handed him her shotgun. She rooted around her pockets for shells, retrieving bullets for the pistol instead. She pushed them back in her pocket, hearing the clicks as several fell onto the concrete floor, and reached into the other pocket. She slammed the red slugs on the floor beside the demon. "No one likes a braggart."

"Paige," Dexx shouted. "Now"—sound erupted all around them —"really good."

"Yeah, yeah." Paige gritted her teeth. She gathered her will and concentrated.

The tendons on Lucius's neck rose. "Hurry," he mouthed, beads of sweat popping out on his skin.

"Concentrate." She gathered the energy around her gift and stood up.

A hand grabbed her wrist. "I cannot protect you from bullets," Lucius said.

Paige heard Dexx shout something that sounded like it could have been "flash-bang." Her eyes widened and she tugged on Balnore's arm. "Don't look."

"At wha—"

An ear-ripping pop split the air and the wall in front of her lit up with an intense white light. Shadow people stopped, their arms raised to cover their faces.

Now.

She reached deep inside and focused. The shouts and commands, the bullets and gunfire all disappeared. The smell of gun smoke tickled her nose. The bright light of the flash-bang died, sending the room into deeper shadow than before.

Dexx left her side, her arm suddenly going cold. Her vision narrowed as she stood. Red aura surrounded each demon possessed body, while purple light emanated from her. A shadow of yellow light pulsated around him as he ran up the stairs. The woman lying on the ground thrashed, blood pumping from her neck.

Paige called upon the power and reached out with clawed fingers only she could see. She grabbed the demon within the woman and yanked.

Fear slashed across the woman's face. She shook her head, her heels digging into the concrete floor as she pushed away.

"Leave," Paige commanded.

A flash of hellfire, a widening of the woman's eyes, and then the red aura changed to a fading green. The woman slumped and fell, unmoving.

Paige faced the next demon, reaching with the clawed shadow hand, power tearing through her veins.

Balnore shoved her to the floor behind the desk, his words flowing slowly to her ears. "Youuuuuu're sssssssshot."

Paige couldn't feel it. She shrugged him off and stood, her power reaching. First one demon. Red aura changed to blue. Then another. A flash of orange that melted into darkness.

A single moment of stillness seemed to hang forever.

Dexx shouted from above her. His gun went off several times. Another man roared. Something crashed. Dexx's voice let out a long trail of agony as a single body fell from the second-story landing.

Paige clenched her jaw and forced all her remaining power into focus. She reached and pulled, reached and pulled. Red auras faded all around her. Cold beads of sweat trailed down her face.

The lump on the floor moved. Dexx moved. An orange light flashed from the end of his gun.

He lived. Relief swarmed through her.

Paige's body jerked back. Bullet. She turned her attention away from Dexx and looked at the possessed woman before her.

Balnore shot the woman in the leg. She cried out, her hands raised as she back away.

Paige tipped her head and reached, sending the demon back to Hell. The woman fell to the floor, cradling her leg and crying in pain.

"Fall back," a male's voice shouted. Sven's voice.

The demons scurried away, still shooting as they disappeared through a back door Paige couldn't see.

She continued to reach for each demon, sending them back one by one, the human host falling to the concrete. Some shouted in pain. Others were silent and dark.

Sven stood on the landing, staring down at her as the last of his minions disappeared into the shadows.

Paige allowed herself to smile. She reached with her hand of power, calling him back to—Balnore batted her arm away and cast a shield ward. Her power bounced away, catching nothing.

The connection to the demon realm was severed. She gathered her arms beneath her and began to rise. Her strength failed, and she collapsed.

"Don't, Peanut," Balnore said into the near silence. The survivors moaned. A door slammed closed somewhere in the distance.

"We almost had him, Bal. What did you do?" Paige used the desk to haul herself to her feet.

Balnore knocked her back down again. He placed one knee in the pit of her stomach.

Paige thrashed beneath him, but every movement, every breath brought pain. "What are you doing?"

"Preventing you from being stupid."

"Well played, Talker," Sven called. "Well played. We'll see how well

you do next time."

Paige ground her teeth and glared at Bal. "Thanks to you, there will be a next time."

Balnore nodded, his black eyes blazing. "Yes. Thanks to me."

Somehow, she didn't think he was talking about a next time for Sven.

"He'll be back. This wasn't his end goal, Peanut. Just a skirmish."

Chapter 51

It didn't take long after that for the pain to hit, and it hit hard. It didn't help to have Balnore's knee digging into her abdomen. She tapped him on the leg.

He rose, his eyes narrowed as he watched her.

She put her head on the cold concrete. Her left hand rose to gingerly touch her upper right arm, but stopped when pain flared through her lower left side. She bled from at least three wounds. One on the upper right arm, another on her lower left side, and one on her—Why hadn't her hip hurt until she'd actually seen the darned thing? She touched her hip and pressed down on it, taking the pain from an almost dull, pulsating ache to a sharp-as-needles almost-itch. Not much better.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

She twisted her head to find Balnore. She didn't have the energy to fight him. She found Lucius. Sweat dripped from his face and his blue silk shirt was drenched. She swallowed. "What the hell happened to you?"

"I saved your fucking life, love. Be thankful." Lucius slurred his words.

Balnore stepped into view. "We have wounded."

"I'll call it in." Paige said, pulling her phone off her belt and trying not to wince. "How many injured? How many"—she used the desk to haul herself to her feet with a groaning grunt—"dead?"

Balnore knelt on the floor in the middle of the room. "Check for yourself."

It was time to stop being a baby. She wasn't badly wounded. Others weren't doing so well.

She stumbled from the desk to a cheap chair, attempting a count of the dead and wounded as she dialed.

"White."

"Hey, Brian. Whiskey. I'm at the old paper mill outside St. Francisville. We need ambulances."

"Plural? What happened?"

"Followed a lead. Found Sven. Mass casualty incident. I count…" She paused to look at the silent man at her feet, her heart heavy with guilt. "Six dead. Ten gunshot victims, at least four critical."

A woman Paige had thought was dead due to the amount of blood on the concrete beneath her turned to her side.

"Make that five critically injured."

White said something at the same time the woman on the floor reached out. "Help me."

"I am." Paige limped toward the woman and knelt. She took off her top shirt and pressed the cloth to the woman's bleeding neck. "How long till help arrives?"

"Five minutes."

"Please hurry." Paige stashed her phone in her pocket and used both hands to apply pressure, capturing the woman's gaze. "You're doing great. Everything's going to be fine."

"I know what you—" The woman's eyes closed. She blinked them open and smiled tightly. "I know what you did for me. For all of us. Thank you."

Paige frowned. "You need to stop talking. Conserve your strength."

The woman's bloody hand gripped Paige's wrist. "You saved me. I am…I am free now."

"Don't talk like that."

"I know what it was." The woman's eyes seemed to brighten. "You removed that thing from me."

Paige looked away. She'd made all this possible.

The woman smiled, her fingers losing some of their strength. "Go with God."

Paige let out a quick breath.

"He walks beside you," the woman said. Her eyes drifted closed. Her fingers twitched once, twice, and slid to the floor.

Paige looked up at the ceiling, fighting the reality of the moment. The brutal truth. She'd known these hosts were human, that some might die. Going in, they were faceless, nameless. In here, they spoke, had families, friends, lives.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

Paige shook herself and stood painfully. "Dexx? Dexx."

"Over here," Balnore shouted.

A man whimpered.

Another cried out for help.

People called to one another as those who weren't hurt as badly pulled themselves out of their dazed states and started helping each other.

"The ambulance is on the way," Paige shouted. "Be calm and patient. They're almost here." She limped around the bodies and evaded the clawing hands of those desperate.

Dexx lay on the floor, one foot propped up, his arms and shoulders tight. He gasped loudly, his body jerking with every breath.

Paige hurried to his side and knelt down. "What's wrong?"

"He had the wind knocked out of him."

Paige looked up at Bal. "Wind knocked out of him? This is worse than a bit of wind."

"He fell from a pretty good distance, Peanut." Bal's eyes softened. "How are the others?"

"One more dead. Four critically injured."

“Then go look after them until the medics show up. I’ve got Dexx.”

Dexx’s mouth opened. His body jerked with another loud breath. His feet flailed on the floor before he closed his eyes.

“Peanut,” Balnore said. “You can’t do anything for him.”

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“Get Lucius out of here and go deal with your people.”

My people. She let out a breath as an instant wave of dread entered her chest. Brian was going to want to know why there were so many dead people in his town. Shit.

She went to the desk, but Lucius was already gone. She spun, her side aching with the movement. “Lucius?” she called. “Luce?”

No answer, just a smear of blood along the wall that disappeared out the door.

Paige went to the door as the sirens closed in.

A red and white box truck plowed into the parking lot, lights going. Two men jumped out of the cab and one out of the back. The driver hurried over. “Are you injured?”

“Not bad.” She changed direction and led them into the mill. “Detective Paige Whiskey, Denver. The scene is clear. Everyone injured was shot. There are four critically wounded.”

The medics ran to attend to the others.

“Where were you shot?” the first medic asked.

“I’m standing,” she said, her eyes glued to the bodies littering the floor.

The man nodded and hopped into a run toward the nearest victim. He shouted questions to his partners and talked into the mic on his shoulder. They had it under control.

“Whiskey,” Brian called from the door.

The shine of headlights hit her in the face when she looked at him.

“What in the hell happened here?”

She moved to meet him halfway. “Followed a lead that turned into a trap, sir.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t say.”

“Sven was here.”

“You didn’t call it in.”

Paige shrugged. “Demons. Did you want your guys or New Roads facing that?”

“Damn it, Paige. We’ve got protocol for this for a reason. Why are so many dead?”

“Possessed. They shot at us first, but we expected they might. We defended ourselves.”

“That’s Mrs. Gardner. When I was sixteen, she was my English teacher.”

Paige rubbed her forehead with her good hand.

“And that over there? That’s Bob. He’s our mechanic. He just installed the new brakes in my wife’s car last week. And that over there? That’s Ray. He and his wife are on the church committee.”

“Sir—”

“Do not *sir* me!” He pressed his fingertips into his closed eyelids. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap. How the hell do I explain this?”

“I don’t know.”

Brian’s jaw clenched as he folded his arms over his chest.

The paramedics wheeled a man out on a stretcher, calling to another person on the floor.

Brian’s nails went white gripping the other arm. “This has got to stop, Detective. The body count is higher than it’s ever been in this parish, and you still have no idea how to bring Sven in.”

“We think we discovered a way to kill him.”

“You think. Right. And kill. Not try. Not jail. Kill.”

“Unless you know of a better way to deal with demons.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Well, unfortunately, this is it. I’m sorry, Brian, I really am, but this has gone much bigger than your parish. This is only the starting place. If he gets loose, nobody anywhere is safe. I’m sorry it happened here.”

Brian stared above her head. “Tell me something good came out of all this.”

“The good news is that the people here…” She rolled her jaw, the coppery smell of blood assaulting her nose. “…are no longer demons.”

Brian’s eyes widened. “That’s the good news?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Sven. Where the hell is he?”

“Gone, sir.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“We don’t know. I’ll find him again.”

“Before or after he sends you another love note?”

She flinched, lowering her gaze.

“You’re done here, Whiskey.”

“Sir? The key is still missing.”

“I don’t care. I have the killers, Whiskey. They’re in jail. Sven will leave when you do. Your job here is done. It’s time for you to leave. Your boss reminded me your time was up anyway.”

“Sir—Brian. That’s not a good idea.”

The chief took two deep breaths at the ceiling. “You had him.”

“Well, yeah. We found him. It was another trap. We barely escaped from it.”

“You had him holed up in his base location, Detective. He’s jumped. He’s gone. He’s not coming back here. So where is he right now? Tell me and I’ll keep you here to find the key.”

“Why the sudden change in attitude?”

He pointed to the ground, the muscles rising in his neck. “My English

teacher was just murdered, along with a half-dozen other *civilians*. That's what changed my attitude. Death follows you, Whiskey. It's all around you, in front, behind, you *breathe* it. I'm tired of the death."

She didn't know what to say.

He ground his teeth and backed away. "You're done here, Whiskey. Go home. If you don't know where he is, we don't need you any longer."

"But, Chief—"

"Peanut," Balnore called, "you might want to get over here."

"Get your team gathered." Brian clenched his fists and took another step back. "Get out of my town."

"Peanut, now."

Brian walked toward one of the victims and knelt beside her, a frown furrowing his forehead.

Paige could only stare. She had seriously fucked up. How in the hell was she going to fix this?

Chapter 52

Paige limped as fast as her leg allowed to Balnore, her heart a heavy stone in the pit of her stomach.

Dexx's fingers clawed at the cement floor, his head thrown back, his mouth wide open.

"Medic," Paige cried as she ran toward him, sliding on her knees to his side. "Medic, we need help over here."

A woman in a blue uniform rushed over and knelt beside her. She opened her med-kit tackle box. "What happened?"

"He fell," Paige said, "from there."

The medic glanced in the direction of the landing and turned her attention back to Dexx. "Adam," she shouted. "Need your assistance."

A man pulled a stethoscope from the bandages of one of the gunshot victims and gave instructions to the third medic.

The female medic smiled at Dexx. "What's your name?"

His mouth opened, pain flashed across his features, but the only sound that came out of his mouth was a wheeze.

"His name's Dexx," Paige said.

The medic gave her a crisp nod. "My name's Jill."

Adam sat beside them. "What do we got?"

"Fall victim," Jill said. "Hold the c-spine. Dexx, do you know where you are?"

He jerked his head.

"Tell me. Where are you?"

"Mill. St.—" Gasp. "Francis—" Wheeze. "—ville."

"Okay, that's good." She took the stethoscope from around her neck.

“I need you to take in a deep breath.”

Dexx’s eyes closed and his jaw clenched as his body revolted.

Adam placed an oxygen mask over Dexx’s mouth and nose. “I know it’s hard, but try to breathe normally. We’ll get you fixed up.”

Jill listened, a frown covering her features. “Diminished breath sounds on the right side.”

“What does that mean?” Paige demanded.

“Jugular vein distention, looks like he collapsed a lung.” Adam looked up at his partner.

Jill nodded, her hands going immediately to her med kit. “Sorry, Dexx, but this is going to hurt.” She pulled out a huge needle and uncapped it.

Paige looked away. She did not need to see that. She heard a rush of air through a small tube. Dexx took in a gulping breath. She turned around in time to see Dexx’s body relax.

“Okay, Dexx, I’m going to—”

Jill’s words disappeared as something pushed at Paige. Her gaze flashed, blurred, and then redefined. She looked up.

A uniformed police officer walked through the door. He paused as his gaze met Paige’s.

The force of the push intensified.

Demon.

Paige’s breathing grew rapid as she concentrated on keeping the demon back.

The police officer stumbled.

Brian glanced up at him and then toward Paige, the whites of his eyes gleaming.

The demon clawed through her defenses, taking control of her hands, her arms—She reclaimed her body, but only barely. Her vision swam again, the push intensifying as the uniform came closer.

“Bal,” Dexx shouted through the oxygen mask. “Demon.”

“I need you to stay calm,” Jill said to Paige. “If you can’t—” She put her gloved hand on Paige’s arm.

Paige struggled with the demon, forcing his way into her magick. No. *Her* legs. *Her* feet.

Paige fell back.

The demon gained an inch, then another.

She cried out.

“What the hell?” Adam shouted.

“Tie her down.” Jill turned her concentration to the neck brace she was trying to put on Dexx.

“No,” Balnore said. “That isn’t—”

The demon flexed her fingers, moved her arm, wiggled her toes. It found the source of her gift, encircled it, fought for control of her tongue, her mouth, her lips.

No!

A bright flash of white light sent everyone stumbling away.

The demon was suddenly gone. No ripping or forcing from her body, just gone.

The police officer fell back against the wall, his hand going to his head as he looked frantically around the old paper mill. “Chief?” he asked, his voice distant. “How did I get here? I was… watching the perimeter. How?”

Paige sat up, blinking. What the hell had just happened?

Brian glared at Paige as he walked toward the officer.

Balnore’s face lost color as he stared at a space behind Paige’s shoulder.

Adam crept toward Paige with a purpose.

She batted him away, twisting around to see what was behind her. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Adam said calmly, dodging her flailing arms. “You had a seizure, and you’re shot.”

Jill sent him a frank look.

“It’s nothing.” Paige scrambled to her feet. What could scare the shit out of a demon like Balnore? “Adam, I’m fi—” She stopped mid-word.

A little girl with bright pink pigtails and a dress so white it seemed to glow stood a few short feet from her.

Adam gained ground. His latex-covered hand gripped Paige’s arm. “We need to check you out. See if you’re—”

The girl raised an ebony eyebrow, her head tipping.

Adam stumbled back, a thick frown furrowing his forehead. He looked at Jill, his hands open. “Where are we?”

Jill blinked. “Shit. She’s hurt worse than we thought. Help me get this one on a stretcher. I’ll check you out in the ambulance.”

Adam followed her orders. “I remember—”

“We’ll get this figured out,” Jill interrupted. “Help me get him in the ambulance.”

Paige stopped paying attention to their conversation. She had more pressing matters to attend to, like who the new threat was and why she’d helped.

Balnore rose gracefully to his feet, his arms spread as he took a step back.

The little girl took a step forward, a sweet smile on her face.

Paige looked from the demon to the girl.

The medics loaded Dexx onto the gurney.

“Wait. Where are you taking him?”

Jill set her box at Dexx’s feet. “Trauma like this? Baton Rouge.”

“Hey,” Dexx shouted, his hand reaching out as far as the restraints would allow. “I’m—”

“No, you’re not,” Paige shouted. “I’ll come for you as soon as I can.”

“You’re—”

“Shut up,” Paige barked. “Get better. Go.”

Dexx continued to protest as Jill and Adam rolled him out the door.

Paige focused on Balnore. “What’s going on?”

“She’s an—”

“Angel,” the little girl said, erupting in a peal of giggles. “I’ve come to help you.”

“Help me?” Paige turned toward the angel too quickly. She jerked to a halt and winced, letting out a harsh breath, her hand going to her side. She bit down on the pain. “How are you going to help? You’re what? Seven? Eight?”

The angel laughed. “You honestly think I am so young?”

“Well, you look—”

The girl grew in height, her features maturing to an age closer to Paige’s, though her hair remained pink and in pigtails. Her dress lost its frills, morphing to silk, flowing around her ankles on a soft breeze. “I am ageless.”

Paige took a step towards Balnore. “I already told Raphael I don’t want his help.”

“Yeah, well, if I were you, I wouldn’t want his help either.”

Paige frowned. “Who are you?”

“Name’s Roxxie.” The angel took a single fluid step towards Paige. “I’m not here to hurt you. I merely wish to help.”

Paige drew closer to the comfort of the demon. “I kinda doubt that.”

“You have wounds.”

“And we’re fine.”

“I can help.”

“We’re fine.”

“I won’t hurt you.”

“We’re fine.”

Roxxie let out a long sigh and took a step back. “Do I scare you?”

“You’re an angel,” Paige said. “I’m the rogue demon talker. Yeah, you scare the living shit out of me. Okay?”

A cell phone rang, the tone echoing in the gathering silence. Paige heard Brian’s voice, but couldn’t really make out what he was said.

Paige didn’t know what to do. “Please, if you want to help, leave.”

“I can’t. Well, I can. Eh—” Roxxie rolled her large black eyes. “Okay. So, I can, but I don’t want to. Heaven is so boring.” She drew out the word. “I need excitement, something different, and right now? You’re the excitement.”

Paige’s expression grew wide. “Seriously? Roxxie, I don’t need this right now.”

Roxxie sent her a smile of angelic innocence.

“You need to—”

“Who are you talking to?” Brian asked as he approached.

Paige frowned at him. “Chief.” She pointed at the angel. “You can’t see her?”

Brian raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “I need to apologize. I think I might have been a bit hasty. It’s just… I *know* these people.”

She couldn’t blame him. Not really. All she had to do was look at the carnage to see why he’d reacted the way he had. “I understand.”

He released an embarrassed breath through his closed lips. “How’s Dexx?”

“They told me. I didn’t understand any of it. They’re taking him to Baton Rouge.”

He winced. “I need your help.”

She couldn’t say she was interested. Her only friend was being carted off to Baton Rouge. She’d lost her only lead on the key. Her demon shield was gone. Who knew where. She was out of her element. “Why? What happened?”

Brian's jaw clenched. "That symbol Sven carved on your chest?"

Paige nodded.

"It's on all the victims. And…" He let out a long breath, his head tipping to the side. "Mike escaped."

Paige frowned. "Without Malika."

Brian massaged his forehead. "Yeah. I need help, Paige. I can't let you leave yet."

Roxxie leaned to the side, her hands clasped behind her back. "I think you might need me after all. What do you think?"

Chapter 53

Roxxie raised her hand. “I know where Mike is.”

Paige stared at the angel and sighed. If ever an angel she could deal with was born, Roxxie was it. She acted normal, didn’t look down on her. “Okay. Are you going to make me talk to thin air, or can you , I don’t know, let everyone see you?”

“You might want to prepare him.” Roxxie shrugged deeply, a cherub-like smile on her otherwise pixie face.

Paige met Brian’s gaze.

He raised his eyebrows and lowered his chin, his hands open at his waist. “What?”

“Angel. She said to prepare yourself.”

He pulled the corners of his lips down, then nodded.

“Okay, Roxxie. I think he’s ready.”

Paige didn’t see anything different.

Brian took a sharp breath. He released the air out of his lungs, his fingers flexed. “Chief Brian White.”

Roxxie beamed at him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. You may call me Roxxie.”

Brian cleared his throat. “Murdering demons and guardian angels.”

“Don’t think all angels are guardians.” Roxxie scuffed her toe. “We’re not.”

Balnore narrowed his eyes, rising to his feet. “I don’t believe we’ve met.”

Roxxie beamed a smile at him. “We haven’t, but I’ve heard *all* about you. You’re quite a rebel, you know.”

“I hope you haven’t heard too much.” Something like a request for caution entered his dark eyes and painted the edge of his smile.

“You’re not the kind I’m sent to watch.”

“Demon?” Brian asked.

Things were getting way too complicated. Paige held up her hand. “He’s a demon. We can trust him. Roxxie, you said you knew where Jones is.”

“I do.”

“We need to catch him before he kills again.” Brian ran his thumb along his eyebrow. “I don’t know how he escaped.”

Roxxie tipped her head. “He’s an angel. You can’t jail an angel. At least not in any confines you have. I don’t know him, but I don’t know them all. He has a strange feel that I can’t place.”

Paige took in a breath, held it, and tried again. “An angel?” Suddenly, too many things made sense. Gabriel had bound Lucius between the planes and killed Sven two hundred years ago. Sven had been reborn in New York a hundred years ago. The key fragment had been passed down from one Moore witch to the next until it got to Malika. Mike was her protector in the same way Balnore was Paige’s.

Gabriel had helped Rachel take Leah. Raphael was Paige’s guardian, though, somehow Balnore had beaten him out. Paige had been needed to pull Lucius from the in-between. Sven needed Lucius’s soul to morph with the other guardian souls in the key.

Sven was merely a pawn in this whole game. He probably wasn’t even supposed to be on the board. Mike Jones was the true mastermind behind all of it. He’d gotten Malika involved. He’d gotten *Paige* involved.

She snorted. The mystery was solved. Now all she had to do was to keep the key from being powered up, from being used. How could she do that, though, if her shield had run off?

Mike Jones was an angel. He needed the key. To follow Sven would

be to go in the wrong direction. Mike's first priority would be to retrieve that key, to get it out of demon hands. He knew Lucius was no longer harbored inside of Paige's body—and now it made sense why he'd known. An angel would.

But would he necessarily hide behind demons?

To get away from her? Maybe.

Damn it. She needed her shield. "Bal, do you have any idea where Lucius is?"

His expression folded in consternation. "Why would I know? Am I his babysitter?"

She released a frustrated breath. "Roxxie, where's Mike Jones, and does he already have the key?"

"The key?" The angel glanced at the ceiling. "I do not know. But he *is* at the junkyard on the other side of town. More than that is too hard to tell, right now. I would like to tell you more, really I would."

Paige closed her eyes, her wounded arm shaking. She banished the pain to the back of her mind, but that was going to stop being enough soon. "Reality check. How likely is it that he's housed with demons?"

"He does know how to play them." Roxxie jerked back, staring at Paige's bleeding arm. "Raphael will have my wings." She stepped to Paige's side, wrapping her lithe fingers around her arm.

Paige batted her away.

Warmth flowed over her, taking the fight right out of her. The tight pain in her arm, her hip, and her side disappeared.

Roxxie stepped back with a huge grin. "What are we waiting for? Let's go."

Paige stared at her as she inspected her healed wounds, the skin pink and new, but blissfully pain free. "How- what did you do?"

"I…" Roxxie tipped her head to the side, the tip of her tongue sticking out. "I healed you. That seemed like the right thing to do. Was I wrong?

You… didn't want to suffer, did you? If you did, I am sorry. Sometimes I just react and don't think long enough."

"No, um. Thank you." She'd been healed. The pain was gone, but the danger still loomed. Paige released a frustrated sigh. "Chief, if there are demons, I can't help. Lucius is in the wind. I have no other protections. We're down the demon hunter. It's just you and Balnore. Not good odds."

Brian threw his hands in the air, his fingers splayed. "That's not good enough, Paige. I need a win here, and he's a known murderer."

"He's an angel. I don't know if you *ever* knew Mike Jones. This could have been a plan decades in the making."

"He was on my team!"

Paige advanced on him. "You *never* knew him. He isn't Mike Jones. He's an angel probably hiding behind demons and we don't have a good enough offense!"

"What if," Roxxie said, her voice small, "I did it. I could shield you? I'm not much, but I have had training."

Paige and Brian faced the angel.

"An angel?" Balnore asked quietly. "If you don't know what you're doing, you could scar her."

"She's already scarred. I don't think I can heal that, but I don't think I would scar her worse. If that helps?" Roxxie bit the inside of her lip.

"Are you serious?" Paige glanced at Brian. "If you are, we have a chance. A chance. If you're not, though, we're all dead and that gate opens and whatever Mike has planned comes to pass."

"He is not Mike Jones, but I do not know his name." Roxxie's brows knit together as she brought a finger to her lips. "Strange that I cannot sense his name. It's not right." Her head came up with a smile. "Right. I know. No. I'm serious. I can do this. I can help you."

Balnore grimaced at Paige. "It's imperative we get that key."

“And what do we do with an angel?”

“If you can handle the demons,” Balnore said, nodding in thought, “I can get Mike.”

“Are you sure? He’s an angel, and I would think you’re at a disadvantage in a one-on-one matchup.”

“If you get me close, I can handle one angel.”

Roxxie gave Balnore a strange look, eyes narrowed. “You are strange, too. You are not like any I have encountered. Balnore is the name they call you?”

“I am not like others. Concentrate on the need at hand. You can shield Paige? If you can, and if I get close, I can deal with the angel.”

Paige thought about it for a second. “Okay. Okay. Let’s go.” With Dexx gone she had to find new partners. None of them were her first choice, except maybe Balnore. But even *he* had too much of his own mind to do what she wanted, *needed* when things came right down to it.

The junkyard was located out in the middle of nowhere. The flat, barren land was broken only by piles of old, junked cars and a single trailer sitting perched on the edge, lit by streetlamps.

Several police cars with several different markings were parked along either side of the highway.

Not a single person showed anywhere.

Paige parked Jackie behind Brian’s car. “Roxxie, tell me why you’re helping. Why do this for us when… your boss is unhappy with us?”

“Fun factor? We don’t get a lot of outside practice. You would call it field work, I think.”

Paige scanned the area. Where was everyone? She didn’t appreciate being blind. She got out, closing Jackie’s door quietly. “Don’t reach into me and start using my gift. Okay? I know how to do it just fine without you.”

Roxxie nodded over the hood. She glowed softly in the pitch-black of

night.

Paige walked up to Brian. “Did you call this in?”

“And risk endangering them to fight demons?” He pulled his gun out and checked the safety. Shaking his head, he pointed his gun at the ground. “Another ploy?”

Roxxie lifted one shoulder, glancing at Balnore. “Humans are fodder to angels.”

Balnore raised a dark eyebrow.

Paige steadied her screaming nerves. “Roxxie?”

Roxxie closed her eyes, biting her lips. She spread her hands in benediction and floated just above the ground. Paige had to admit, Roxxie looked the part. Felt like it too.

Brian blinked, but otherwise didn’t react as he kept his eyes on the junkyard.

Paige’s nerves settled as though someone had taken a silk brush to them. She took in a deep breath and released it.

“Better?” Balnore asked.

She nodded. “It’s working. Brian, stay here until I clear the scene. You go in there before I clear it. You’re as good as fodder, like everyone else.”

Brian’s jaw clenched.

“Good. Bal, you ready?”

The demon shrugged with his eyebrows. “After you.”

Paige stepped closer to the chain-link fence. The gate stood open.

The sun crept up the horizon, shooting small knives of light into the lightening sky, shoving back the inky blackness.

Great. Dawn. She wasn’t sure how time had passed so quickly, but it couldn’t have come at a worse time. She needed to be able to see, and dusk played tricks on eyes. Her’s at least.

She moved in, assuming the others followed behind.

A thick bank of fog rolled in as they made it past the first pile of cars. It opened in front of them, moving out of the way like a flimsy curtain moving in the breeze.

Noise, talking. No, it was talking, but the words weren't anything she recognized. She moved forward slowly, testing the feel, and their need to possess her. So far, Roxxie was a good as her promise.

Sneaking along, she saw them. Demons. Five of them. They laughed, cavorting like little kids torturing a fly or a dog.

Three cops writhed on the ground at their feet. She barely made out the sounds of their cries as the fog parted, the howls of laughter from the demons sending shivers up her spine.

Had Dexx been right? Was this all there was to demons, the torture, the possessing, the need to subjugate humans? The few she called were at least cordial. The thought made her heart hurt. She relied on demons so much had she… lost sight of what they were? No. Balnore was her friend. There *had* to be demons out there that didn't belong to the evil crowd. She knew humans and angels that were lumped in there too.

She glanced back to Roxxie. "You sure you can do this?" Paige muttered.

Roxxie squared her small shoulders. "I have you shielded already. Go with grace, go with speed. Go get them."

Paige called up the power of hell. She formed it into ethereal clawed hands. She grabbed two of the demons with those hands, gripping each of the demons' souls, maintaining her hiding spot behind the junk cars.

Fear covered their nearly human faces as they turned to face her. They fought bought back, throwing their soul energy at her arms.

Curling her lip, Paige tugged on the flow of power from hell. Her heart asked questions her mind couldn't translate. Curiosity. Question. In her mind, she asked one question. *Do you want them back?*

A portal opened beneath her feet, one her gifted eyes could see. A

thinning of the veil between her world and hell as it answered back. *Yes.*

She flung them through the portal.

Hell reclaimed them with unabashed glee.

Quick as she flung those through, she grabbed two more and sent them back. The third, realizing something was up turned to flee, or poof away somewhere else but stopped with a gurgle.

Balnore has his hand out clawed and griping the air, channeling Darth Vader with some sort of spell that held the demon in place and fighting for air.

Paige turned her ethereal hands and pulled it close to her. “All you had to do was live among us and help us learn responsibility. You showed no mercy, so I’ll return the favor.” She sent it back as it struggled in her grip.

Roxxie cried out.

Power flowed through Paige. The ethereal wind whipped her hair into wild disarray. Hell beckoned like a lover. “Are you well? I will move on by myself. I think I’ve got this now.”

“It—it’s not—” The angel waved Paige on. “I’m fine. I can do this. Please don’t go alone.”

Paige’s nerves went raw, as if she were standing in the middle of a fire. Then they calmed just as suddenly. “Are you sure?”

“No.” The angel’s voice was small.

Paige felt the need to hurry, but she could also do this without Roxxie if the angel failed. The power filled her, warmed her, sent spikes of confidence coursing through her blood. She breathed. This was her gift. It was a part of her. She could do this. She had to. Sounds grew distant as she concentrated her will, turning off distractions.

She had to.

Chapter 54

Paige turned back to the uniforms on the ground. One of the men on the ground scrambled to his feet.

A woman ran out from behind a pile of cars. Demon.

Its soul called to Paige, but not as though it were trying to push her out. The way demon souls had always called to her. She reached for it.

The rising cop pulled out his gun and blasted the demon.

It laughed. With a flick of the woman's wrist, the officer fell to the ground.

Paige raised an eyebrow and released her power.

The demon froze, unable to disperse, to move.

"Talker," a loud, multi-toned voice shouted behind her. "Talker!"

Paige banished the first demon from the woman, then reached toward the next one. With a wiggle of her fingers, the demon returned to the loving arms of hell.

Her power slithered outward, hunting. In her mind's eye, the cars, the fog, and the destruction became diaphanous. She saw demons, but not as red dots in a globe. She saw their faces, what they were doing, where they were.

She raised her head and walked to the next batch of them, ripping them from earthly existence.

"Detective?"

She paused and focused on the man at her feet. "Duke?"

He scrubbed his face with the back of his arm. "What's goin' on?"

"I'm doing what I do best." She jerked her arms back, bringing two more demons to kneel at beside the police officer. "Be gone."

The two demon souls fell screaming through the portal. Their human

husks collapsed to the ground.

Paige stepped over the female. “Get your men out of here, Duke. Take the innocent out, too. You’ve done a good job.” The fog wrapped around and between them. “Now.”

He ran on all fours before gaining his feet. He took two steps at a run before coming back to collect civilians and his fellow officers.

The demons fell back within the maze of the junkyard. Now that they knew she was there, they erected their own wards. She felt them, but couldn’t see them any longer. Didn’t matter, she was their home come to call them back.

Guns fired. People shouted, then nothing.

Silence.

Paige paused between an old beat-up truck and a station wagon with a crushed-in roof. She peered into the fog. No souls called to her gift. Her ethereal arms were poised like snakes, waiting, watching.

More demons attacked, attempting to possess her from cover first.

Roxxie fell to her knees.

Paige found them and sent two of the demons through the portal. “Get up. You can’t stay here. ”

“I can’t.” The angel panted, sweat dripping from her pink hair. “Too many. Must call for help. I didn’t know- how are they- it’s too hard. ”

A demon emerged from the fog striding with purpose, his face twisted in a grim smile. He balled his fist and slammed it against Paige’s cheek.

Pain crashed through her. She stumbled back, her gift latching on.

The damn thing pushed at her soul, attempting to take over. The shield around her wavered, weakened. It thinned to the point of collapse, Paige fighting to bolster what she could.

“Roxxie,” Paige gritted out.

The angel’s fingers twitched. Blinding white angel light stabbed the demon in the chest. It exploded to ash, along with its human shell. “I’m

going to call—”

“Like hell you are.” Paige reached down and pulled the angel to her feet. The shield firmed, solidified, but not as strong as before. She couldn’t allow the angels to fight. Her summoner claws flexed. Two more demons ran healing into her power, screaming as they were welcomed home. “Just concentrate harder.”

“I can’t.”

Paige stopped her advance to the center of the junkyard. “Then why the hell did you volunteer?”

“She’s always getting herself into trouble.”

Demons in the obscuring mist stilled. Claws scraped against metal in the distance. More powerful demons waited there while the minor demons threw themselves at the witch, weakening her defenses.

Paige’s entire body went cold. “Xael.”

“You needed us. We came for you to help. You need it. ”

Paige gritted her teeth as two more demons sauntered from the fog. “You said to pray. I haven’t prayed.”

“Just so, but sometimes we watch out for the foolish.” Xael punched his fist into her chest. He filled her presence with a swell of chill. Her arms moved without her direction. Her legs propelled forward. Her lips released names she didn’t know. Demons screamed. The demons and hosts fell to the ground and writhed. The ground wavered and turned a deep orange the color of her earth fire. Their eyes turned fearful and pleading as they scrambled to the edge of the glowing portal. They were swallowed by the earth before the portal returned to normal dirt. Roxxie fell to the ground, her head hanging exhausted.

Silence fell over the junkyard.

“Sven Seven Tails,” Xael called. “Come forward and meet the Host. Meet your judgement. Or do you wish to hide as your minions are sent home one by one?”

The fog swirled in front of her and slowly dispersed. “I almost thought you wouldn’t come, mate.”

Sven stood tall and strong in front of them. He tipped his blond head to the side. His eyes blinked black in the growing light and then reverted to human again. “And you brought friends. I’d have thought you’d’ve left these ones behind.”

“You do not fear me, demon?” the angel asked.

Sven snorted. “No. Did you bring my demon? Lucius.” He wagged his finger, staggering a step as though drunk. “I require *Lucius*.”

“A trade? You have nothing worth the demon.”

Paige recovered while Xael and Sven talked. That damned angel used her gift and twisted her inside out and backwards.

He smiled, slick and slow. “You might be surprised.” Sven snapped his fingers.

Three demons came forward, two pushing a third, his hands bound. He should have been tall and dark, but his body was covered in bruises and blood. He stood stooped, ragged and near exhaustion.

Xael raised an eyebrow. “What would I want with that?”

Sven chuckled. “Do ya really know nothing?” He shifted his dark gaze to Paige. “Well, he is only an archangel in training after all.” He turned back to Xael. “Why would you stoop so low to learn about who we are?”

“There are billions of your kind.” Xael shifted beside her. “How could I possibly know you all?”

Sven tsked. “This is one of the guardian demons, the lost brethren.”

He was one of the keepers of the key. How did Xael not know?

Paige raised her chin. What was the point of giving her the beaten man? Why was Lucius so special? Could they save him?

Sven gestured to the demon in question. “Marx.”

The demon raised his head. There was little she could make out. Dark blood oozed from cuts and welts along his face. His violet eyes met hers

with an intensity his haggard body betrayed.

“A demon for a demon,” Sven said. “You have the one I want.”

“I don’t want this one.” Xael straightened his shoulders. “He’s worthless to me.”

Sven laughed. “You think so? Where are your guardian angels, eh?” He bit his bottom lip. “Ah. That’s right. You don’t got any. Why? Because the angelic horde couldn’t be bothered. So, you need these demons. You need him.”

Xael smiled, his lips barely separating. “The answer is no. You can keep that one. I’ll keep Lucius. Do whatever you want…” The angel’s ebony eyebrows rose. “…with that.”

Thunder roared across Sven’s features. “You leave me no choice.” He raised his fist.

Marx evaporated, the trail of his smoky existence disappearing into Sven’s pocket.

What just happened? Where had the guardian gone?

Sven took a defensive stance, his hands raised. Power gathered around him. “I had hoped to make a bargain with you, to join forces, like.”

Shots rang out from behind her the bullets slammed into Sven.

Paige twisted to see behind her.

Xael released her.

She went on one knee, finding where the shot came from. Brian.

Sven saw the man and chortled. “Bullets do no good, man-child.” He flicked his wrist. Cars rose around him. “Nothing either of you have will do much good against me.”

The cars swirled around her, dipping and rising.

Roxxie tackled Paige, raising her arm. Dust and wind whirled around them.

The cars fell like scattered toys in a wide circle.

Paige blinked. Control of her body, of her gift that belonged to her.

Roxxie's shields were back in place. She tapped into her core and called upon the air. It came easily, happy to frolic and dance. Dust rose.

Xael's face twisted as he faced off with Sven. "You are not a demon."

Sven laughed. "I am not a man either."

Roxxie grasped Paige's hand, her flaming pink hair glued to her face. "You have to remove Sven. You're the only one who can."

Where was Balnore? This was supposed to be his job. If he still lived.

Without the dagger. Without any weapon. She had her magick.

With Roxxie's shields in place, she fell into herself. She had the ethereal hands. She had the elements. She had enough.

She imbued her hell-empowered claws with the might and resilience of earth. The tenacity of wind followed, the patience of water next. She needed the fury of fire. She dipped into her anger, her frustration. Earth fire answered, rising like a leviathan.

Her shadow arms grew like golem wraiths.

Sven paused, frowning at her in surprise.

The claws found his face, raked his chest.

He cried out. Stones and pebbles rose from the ground as he called them with his own magick. They shot at her, speeding like bullets. The buffeting winds knocked them aside. "You can't send me back, Talker."

She combined her magicks, the elements and shadow hands in her attack. The wind howled around them. It felt like being in the middle of a firestorm. Rain, dirt, debris, and a side mirror raced by.

Roxxie's hair battered her face.

Power slammed into Paige like a wall, forcing her to her hands. She pushed back with her shadow arms, every muscle in her body tight and taut. She bowed her head, throwing everything she had at the demon.

The car beside her burst into flame, glowing red with earth fire. The heat seared her. She heard her hair crisp, smelled the odor of her singeing flesh. She got to her feet and stumbled away.

The car on the other side of her passed the flames and went straight to melting. She fled the heat. Her skin hurt with prickles as it cooled.

Away from the too intense heat, she continued her assault.

Her demon-ripping talons weren't enough. Sven deflected and turned aside most of her attacks. Not enough smashed through. She needed something else. Something more.

Desperate, she called on the deep fire far below in the Earth. It resisted, angry at being called. Paige urged the fire up, coerced and cajoled as she could. Finally it answered, rage infusing its climb.

It struck out at Paige as it emerged, ready to do as she willed. The pain overwhelmed her momentarily as she gathered her mind's will. She retracted her shadow arms and pushed the power of the fire into the whirlwind buffeting the demon.

Sven screamed a guttural roar as his body was engulfed. He raged against it. He pushed. He fought. He weakened.

Paige walked slowly toward him, calling more flame, bringing more fury to the winds.

Roxxie screamed and crumpled to the ground.

Xael roared, but did not attempt to shield himself from her onslaught. He disappeared behind a wall of solid fire and carried on the wind. Spent, Paige released the deep fire and wind, calling on water and earth to soften her fall.

Everything stopped with a thunderous clash.

Paige opened her eyes. Sven lay on a tiny patch of ground that survived her attack, apparently unconscious.

The power ceased as though she'd come to the end of a chain.

Paige scrambled to find more power. Something, anything. Rage. She could use it.

Nothing. She was numb and tapped out.

She stared around her in surprise. She propped herself up on unsteady

arms. Her heart raced inside of her chest, her breathing heavy as though she'd sprinted a marathon.

Silence surrounded her. No bugs. No breeze. The sun climbed, shedding brighter light on the devastation.

Sven lifted his head and slowly staggered to his feet, his clothing ragged and scorched, his face red and savagely peeling. He smiled, raising his hands above his head. He shouted a single word.

Paige found herself flying backwards.

She landed hard on top of a car. Pain shot through her body. She slipped from the roof to the ground.

Sven stood above her, his expression softened with pleasure. "You've been my best opponent. You *almost* won. I think that might be what I love most about you. You put everything into it, and if you had more, you'd give it. "

Paige struggled to rise, to fight.

Sven knelt beside her, caressing her face with fingers already healed. "You are amazing."

She pulled away from him.

He cupped the back of her head, locking her gaze with his. "But why are we here?"

"The key." Her whispered response lacked conviction. Something in the gleam in his eye, or the set of his jaw. Was she wrong?

He raised an eyebrow. "Why the key?"

"You want to open the Gate to Hell."

His eyes softened. "Why?"

A frown flickered between her brows. "To create chaos?"

"Chaos without purpose is simply chaos."

She realized in that moment just how little she knew about him. What did he want? "Give me your name."

One corner of his lips lifted as he ducked his head. "You have to earn

that.” He looked at her through his eyelashes. “No. But Sven Seven Tails has a nice ring to it. Keep calling me that. ”

All her reasoning, all her posturing, everything she thought she’d been able to piece together was wrong. Again. His look told her she was on the wrong track. She’d studied the evidence. It had led her to these conclusions.

But what did he want?

Mike Jones was the mastermind. He’d been the one to find Malika, to get the key, to trap the guardians within it.

What did Sven want?

Sven had been nothing more than a lucky find, a coincidence. He’d tripped onto Mike and Malika. She knew that because he’d nearly possessed her and had let the information slip.

But he hadn’t let slip what he wanted.

He pressed his lips onto her forehead. Rising, he turned and strolled away. The fog rolled around him. “We’ll meet again, little bird. Next time, bring me my demon.”

Chapter 55

What had Paige gotten herself in the middle of? She rolled over onto all fours and nearly wished she hadn't. Everything hurt. She'd gotten her ass handed to her. For what? She was no closer to gaining control of the key. Sure. She had a few less demons on the playground, but what had that bought her?

Nothing.

Sven escaped. Again.

Mike Jones was nowhere.

And that damned key was still missing.

Roxxie lay on the ground, her pink hair splayed along the pale dirt.

Paige crawled to her, gravel digging into her already healing skin. "Roxxie."

The angel didn't stir.

Paige didn't *see* anything wrong. She checked for a pulse at the angel's wrist. Did they even have a pulse? Roxxie's chest rose and fell. Still breathing. No blood. What else could it be?

Well, she'd been Paige's shield. If Paige felt as if she'd been sucker-punched by a Mack truck, it could be Roxxie had taken a large chunk of that blow instead. Maybe she needed rest, sleep. Whatever angels did. She picked up the angel's head and cradled it in her lap, leaning against the tire of the car behind her.

Mundanes pick themselves off the ground around the junkyard.

"How did we get here?" one woman asked, massaging her arm.

A man gripped his head with both hands, spinning in a small circle, his eyes wide. "What happened?"

"What's going on?" Another man asked, tugging at his pants as though

seeing something odd. What that was, Paige had no idea. “Why am I at the junkyard?”

“Demons.”

A middle-aged woman looked at the man.

He turned to Paige, his blue T-shirt bunched around his waist. “What do we do?”

Paige didn’t know. If only she could protect them. Even with an angel to shield her, Sven had still won without breaking a sweat. That wasn’t exactly true, but the damned demon had walked away while she lay panting on the ground like a dying dog. She looked down at the unconscious angel. “Go to church. It doesn’t matter which one. Choose one and stay there.”

Xael stepped through the crowd. People made way for him without looking directly at him, as though they couldn’t see him, or as if acknowledging his presence was wrong.

“Watch out for each other.” Church really couldn’t help them, but it couldn’t hurt either. “Any of you can be possessed at any point of time. This is not a witch hunt, people. If you suspect someone has been possessed by a demon…” Paige stopped. She needed a real plan. These people needed a real plan, and she just didn’t have one.

“Then you let me know.” Brian limped into view. “Gather everyone in our parish. Take them to a church like she said.” He glanced at Paige. “Leave no one behind.”

Dozens hurried off, pulling out their phones.

Brian watched them leave as though counting how many lives were saved. “What are we supposed to do with the possessed?” he asked softly.

“I’ll—” Paige let her head fall back to the car behind her, her eyes heavy with fatigue. She had no clue. “I’ll think of something.” Somehow.

“Mike’s not *here*,” Brian said.

The whole point of going to the junkyard had been to get Mike Jones and that damned key. Mike Jones. The angel. And the broken key that didn’t seem to work, anyway. How did she even know the gate had been opened with the key? What if it had something to do with what Sven had done instead?

“What did that man say to you, Detective?”

Paige met Brian’s gaze. “What man?”

“The blond.”

“Oh.” How had it completely slipped her mind that Brian hadn’t actually seen Sven yet? “That’s Sven Seven Tails, the demon.”

“The mastermind?”

“I had thought so.” But maybe he still was. Maybe she wasn’t seeing everything. “I’m having trouble thinking they did this together. Maybe they did, I don’t know. I’m having trouble thinking right now.”

The evidence had led her here.

To a junkyard filled with demon-possessed humans protecting an angel with a broken key to the Gate of Hell.

No. That really didn’t make sense. Did it?

She’d discovered a lot in the past couple of days.

What and how did it change the evidence?

Sven. He was…*courting* her. Courting her through her field—as a homicide detective and as a Whiskey witch. Had he been sending her secret messages all along?

Like the ones on the bodies? No, he couldn’t have been. He’d made it obvious… right?

Or perhaps he’d only had to resort to that because she’d missed the other messages he’d left her.

Brian’s face studied the angel and her as he knelt beside her. “What did he say, Paige?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“Peanut.” Balnore appeared at her elbow.

She jerked in surprise. “Hey, Bal. I thought you were… I don’t know.”

“Are you injured?” All business, then.

“Where were you? We got to him. Right there, Sven, he was right there. And you…” she shook her head.

“Peanut, I had no chance to get here. As soon as we separated I was swarmed. There just wasn’t… there was no way to help you. But I’m here now. What’s the next move?”

She had no clue. They were drowning and she had no idea how to fight this. How to get the key. How to get out of town. How to keep the gate closed. How to end Sven. How to contain Mike Jones. “Check in on Dexx. I need to know how bad the damage is. How bad is he’s hurt.” Did she love him? Maybe. Feelings she thought were buried with Leah’s father were stirring.

Balnore nodded and dispersed.

“Paige.” Brian caught her attention.

She waved him off. “Protect your parish, Brian. I’m trying to piece things together, and I don’t have any answers right now. As soon as I do, I’ll come find you.”

He narrowed his eyes, but then nodded and rose.

What was the next move? The real game?

Where was Lucius? Lucius. How the hell did he play into all this? Why weren’t the pieces coming together?

She was asking the wrong questions.

Damn. Damn it all, *dammit*. What had Sven said?

Xael cleared his throat.

He was still there? “What do you want?”

“Why did you not ask for my help?” Xael leaned his elbow on his

knee. “Why do you insist on making things harder for yourself?”

Did he seriously just ask that? With everything going on, that’s the question he asked? “All I want to do right now is punch you in the face.”

“You *do* look agitated. Why did you not ask? I turned your power against them. I pulled back when you refused. I waited for you permission to use the power again, but you never asked.” His expression showed no emotion. “Why?”

The son of a bitch was a fucking angel. Maybe he was too disconnected from the real world to comprehend what the fuck he’d done. “Do you realize what it’s like when you use my gift for me? You reached inside. You took over. You fucking possessed me after I’ve already been possessed by a demon.”

His head ticked to the side. “While I’m in control, you’re safe.”

Safe? He had a loose definition of the word. “I’m safe with *me* in control. All I needed was a shield. I nearly had him. *Without* you.”

He took in a slow, deep breath, his eyebrow raised. “You did surprise me today.”

“Surprised you. Oh my God. Surprised *you*?” That egotistical son of a bitch. “Do you know where Sven is?”

The angel shook his head. “How do you plan on dealing with the half-demon?”

“*Not* with your help.”

The angel flattened his lips and sighed.

She needed him out of there so she could think. “What can you tell me about Mike Jones?”

He thought for a silent moment. “Nothing.”

“Is it really possible he’s an angel? What’s his name?”

“He *is* an angel, though what his mission is, and who he’s working for, I don’t know. I don’t know his name. That is unusual. I should have felt it.”

“And that doesn’t strike you as odd?”

“Do you know everyone on your police force? Do you know all the officers, the sergeants?”

The Denver police force *was* a large operation. Not quite as large as the angel population, she was sure, but she understood his point. “No. I don’t.”

He raised his eyebrows and nodded once. “I confess it is strange. I had been sure I would have heard of him. I will search the histories to find his name.”

“Is Roxxie okay?” Her head lay on Paige’s arm in such a way it cut off the circulation to her hand.

“I must take her to be healed.”

“Where will you take her?”

“Some things are best kept secret. That is for your protection. As for you, I am not a healer, but I can do a little.” He gripped Paige’s shoulders.

Tepid warmth enveloped her. The chill seeped from her bones, the warmth increasing.

The angel bent his head, his neck muscles straining.

Paige took in one breath, then two, and slowly began to feel minutely better.

Xael fell back, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he stared at her. “That is the best I can do. You were more damaged than I realized. That should help you recover your strength.”

She shrugged, feeling better. Not one hundred percent, but better. That had to count for something.

Xael gathered Roxxie in his arms and disappeared in a blinding flash of angelic light and a storm of flying dirt.

Paige let herself sit there a moment longer. What had Sven said? She didn’t know him. Chaos for the sake of chaos or something. So, he had

something planned, something specific.

Her phone chirped.

She pulled it off her belt and put it to her ear. “Whiskey.”

“Detective.” Mike Jones’s tone rose with joy. “I have Fanny.” His voice dropped to icy malevolence.

Paige straightened, her heart racing. “Why? Leave her out of it.”

“You left me no choice.”

“What do you want?”

“I want the demon, Lucius. Bring him and I’ll give you Fanny back.”

Why did everyone want *Lucius*? “What assurances do I have that you won’t kill her anyway? You’re a serial killer, Jones. Your word doesn’t mean a whole lot anymore.”

“Are you trying to anger me?” he mocked. “Where’s your negotiating skills?”

“They’re kind of spent.”

Mike chuckled.

Paige needed to buy herself some time. She’d just charged headlong into two situations without enough protections or thought or planning. Twice was more than enough. “I need proof she’s alive.”

He clucked his tongue.

Fanny’s voice came blaring through the phone. “Paige, honey, is that you?”

“Yes,” Paige shouted. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she said, her voice tinged with fear. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’ve never been there before?”

“No. Ain’t no place I know of—wait. No. Please—”

Fanny’s voice trailed off.

“You have your proof,” Mike said into the phone, his voice crisp.

“Now bring me the demon.”

“Where are you?”

“I’ll give you a location when I know you have the demon. Come alone. You don’t want me to bring Sven into it.”

“He’s not with you.” Her mind scrambled as her mouth moved almost on its own. “As a matter of fact, he and I had a lovely conversation. Also, Xael’s here and wanted to say hello.”

Pause. “Well,” he said, his tone tight, “haven’t you been busy?”

Finally. She had something right, but what? “Do you have the key?”

“Of course. How else am I going to open the gate? Get the demon.”

She needed time. “Where are you?”

Silence.

“Mike?”

Silence.

“Damn it.” Paige checked her phone. It flashed and showed two big buttons, one red, one green. He’d hung up on her. She pulled herself to her feet, using the car behind her as a prop. Xael had helped a little. She was getting old—and she was out of shape, magickal shape.

She needed a damned plan. Quick.

Time to talk to Malika.

Chapter 56

Paige squared her shoulders and stormed through the police station. Her booted footsteps echoed in the nearly deserted cells. “Malika.”

The woman rose to her feet from the thin mattress. “Paige, what’s going on? Where is everyone?”

Paige stopped within arm’s reach of the bars and looped her thumbs in her belt loops. “You don’t know?”

“How would I? I’ve been in here. Where’s Mike?”

“How does it feel to be left out of the plan? He left you.” Paige rubbed her oily, dirty chin. When was the last time she washed her face? “He ran, leaving you in here. By yourself. He’s trying to open the gate right now. Without you.”

A startled chuckle escaped Malika’s lips, a frown flittering across her brow. “Not without me.”

Paige snorted, scanning the front area through the door. She had no idea what Mike would do next. Call? She hoped, but she’d been thrown ten too many surprises for one day. And she still had Sven to deal with. What was he planning? “I’m here for one very pointed reason. Mike has Fanny.”

“He wouldn’t leave me.”

Paige turned her head to look at Malika. “He abandoned you, Malika. I need to know where he is.”

“I won’t tell you.” Malika’s brown eyes rounded with betrayal, her lips pursed in wavering conviction.

Trust and loyalty scorned. Paige could empathize with that. “You have no reason to protect him.”

“You don’t know anything. We love each other.”

“He left you here.” Paige pointed to the ground with her finger to emphasize her points. “To take the blame? To take the fall? To get you out of his way?”

Malika’s breath shook. “He’s protecting me.”

“In jail.” Paige released a breath of derision. “Right. He’s an angel, presumably with God’s permission, and he needs *you?*”

Malika blinked, her shoulder sagging.

“What we have now points to you. You’re going to get the death penalty because right now because the evidence points to you. With him gone, you’ll take the entire rap. Mike set you up.”

Malika’s gaze unfocused, her lips rounding as the full brunt of her situation came to light.

“Malika.” Paige scanned the area. Quiet. Still. Empty. Her Spidey senses said nothing. Safe. For now. “The key passed down to you through the generations. Mike came to you because of that. Not for love.”

“Mike was always there. We grew up together. How?”

Something pinged her radar. Not much, or near, but something caught her attention.

“Because of the key. He’s an *angel*, or did you forget? He manipulated you for your entire life, just waiting for the best opportunity to get us together.” Paige kept her attention glued to the doorway, not sure why or what was setting off her survival instincts. Her hand went to her gun. “He used you. Sven used you. Your use is gone. They don’t need you anymore. They have what they want. They have your key. They can open the gate.”

“They need the demon. Lucius.”

“They do.” Paige fingered the grip of her gun as she readied her magick. The deep fire wouldn’t stir, but wind and water answered

easily.

Malika stepped into Paige's peripheral. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this. We were supposed to come here, reclaim Lucius's soul, have a little fun, and then open the gate. Bring heaven to Earth."

Paige's eyebrows shot up. "And you thought it would be fun to prepare this town by spilling blood?"

"I've read the Bible, Paige. Angels are nothing if not bloodthirsty."

Paige couldn't disagree.

Malika took in a steadying breath. "He's at Stanley's barn."

Paige narrowed her eyes. That seemed a bit sudden. "Trap? I'll suspect one anyway."

"If he's taken a friend of yours—"

"I barely know the woman."

"—or anyone he thinks you'll come after, it's a trap."

Paige couldn't say the idea surprised her. It didn't. "What can I expect?"

Malika shook her head, her gaze glazed, and shrugged. "I don't know. He's an angel."

"But you thought he loved you. Surely that means you meant enough for him to show you things; his abilities, his magicks."

"No. He—" She rested her forehead against the bars. "He said he was protecting me by not showing me what he could do."

"Awesome. Well, I don't know where this barn is."

"Few people do." Malika gave her directions. Finished, she sat on the lone cot, her posture defeated.

Paige paused, looking at the woman, but turned to leave. Whatever happened to her happened. No matter how she'd been manipulated, the woman was still a murderer. She pressed the bar on the door to the parking lot.

"Paige," a male voice said with a lilt.

She called the magicks as she spun before she let them go. Her start skipped a few beats at the demon standing directly behind her. “Lucius. Where have you been?”

He raised a dark eyebrow. “Sven has the woman from the inn.”

“That doesn’t answer where you’ve been.”

He quirked his lips. “I’m guessing the angel wishes to bargain? Yeah? My life for hers?”

Paige opened the door, the bright sunlight stabbing her in the eye. Lucius walked with her through the parking lot. Jackie sat ready to go, but it felt strange that Dexx wasn’t there to take the wheel. “Yeah. He wants you. Do you have a plan? Because I don’t. He has the key. I have nothing. No way to kill him. No way to fight him and walk away. I’ve got nothing.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“I do and the answer is no. Both Mike Jones and Sven want you. I don’t know why, but they do.”

“I’m a very powerful human with demon power, love. Trust me. I can hold my own.”

“Ri-ight. Right. Right. Because you did so well at the paper mill. Ran away from that one. Yeah. Yup.” She stopped at Jackie’s driver’s side door. “You were a freakin’ hero.”

“You appear upset.”

“Wow.” She glared at him over Jackie’s roof. “You could be a detective.”

“You mock me.”

“You’re damn straight.” She jingled the keys in her hand. “What are you going to do? Because I really need a good plan. I know where Mike is, but I have no way of getting that key back. I need that key, Lucius. I need to get out of here. I don’t know how to win this one.”

When Lucius didn’t respond, she slid into the driver’s seat. The keys

remained in her hand as she watched the police station. She knew where she had to go. She just didn't know what to do. She had no weapons good enough for the fight. She was going to end up dead.

Leah.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Paige didn't have the luxury of ending up dead.

The passenger door opened. Jackie groaned under Lucius's weight before the door slammed shut. "He has my brother."

"Yeah." She ran her thumb along the key. "I know. He's powering the key with the souls of the guardian demons."

"I have to get them back."

"You go to Mike right now, without a plan, you'll lose, and your soul will be added to the key. The *last* soul."

"Do you have a plan?"

"No." She started the car and put her in reverse. Staying in the parking lot wasn't helping anyone. Moving was better than nothing.

Maybe.

She followed the directions Malika gave her and parked Jackie next to Mike's silver sedan.

A dilapidated barn of gray wood slats leaned against a tall bank of wild grass in the middle of nowhere. No one would hear anything unless there was an explosion. Screams for help would get her nowhere. Not that she was the kind of person who would scream for help. She was on her own with a demon who could set off the key, open the gate, and cost her everything.

What options did she have? She pulled her aching body out of the car.

Lucius appeared at her side, the sawed-off shotgun in hand.

"Don't let the gate open, Guardian. Okay?" What would bullets do? Not much against demons. Not Sven anyway.

He nodded and gestured for her to lead.

She approached the barn as low to the ground as she could while

walking. The grass was tall, not much of a cover, and there was no way Mike hadn't heard Jackie. Being stealthy seemed silly, but instinct told her to stay as low as possible.

Mike opened the barn door, his arms wide. "I was just about to call you."

Paige stood and sighted down the barrel at him. "You sounded serious on the phone."

"You brought the demon?"

"You asked so nicely." What was she supposed to do? Shoot him? Would that even buy her time?

"Where's the ruddy key?" Lucius demanded.

Mike tipped his head, his eyes narrowed.

"Running out of time, Mike," Paige said. "Where's the key?"

"With me." A smile slid into place on his face. His legs bunched up, and he leapt.

Paige pulled the trigger. The shotgun roared, kicking into the saddle of her shoulder.

Mike stumbled, a silver substance blooming on his chest.

Lucius growled, his arm outstretched.

Paige racked the shotgun and re-sighted.

Lucius caught Mike by the throat, slamming him to the ground.

Mike gripped the demon's large wrist with a hand. The other disappeared into his pocket.

Fucking shit! Paige advanced, not sure what else to do. "Lucius, he's going after the key."

Mike pulled it from his pocket, his lips moving.

The force of Lucius's grip on his throat prevented words. But did the spell need spoken words or intent?

Mike slammed the key to Lucius's shoulder. His mouth widened in a silent scream.

The world rocked. The wind kicked. Water slammed into her from out of nowhere. Fire leapt from cracks forming in the earth. The world tore at itself.

Shit, shit, shit. If the angel or the key or the demon or who the fuck ever was pulling on earth magick, Paige could play. She focused on the wind, whispering to it, coaxing it to her will.

It turned on Mike, pummeling him, breaking his hold on Lucius.

The key tumbled to the grass.

Nothing changed.

Lucius released his hold on Mike and stumbled away, his hands covering his ears, his mouth open.

Damn.

Mike lay on the ground and laughed, the sound barely audible over the screeching wind. The blaze of the fire sweeping around them singed her still sensitive arms.

Not knowing what else to do, she grabbed Mike's shirt, intent on beating the crap out of him with the butt of the shotgun.

His laughter stopped as his gaze captured hers. His palm landed solidly upon the scar on her chest.

Pain. Light. Blasting. Rending. Fear.

She latched on to his wrist with both hands, dropping the gun. She fought, trying to dislodge his hand from her scar. They stumbled, somehow he kept his hold on her.

He stood as he grabbed her elbow and drug her up with him, his face twisted in victory.

Piercing, stabbing, shooting pain.

Rip. Burst. Raze. Rent.

The power ripped through her, tearing at her limbs, threatening to rip her into pieces.

She reached within herself and found her gift.

What was an angel but a different kind of demon?

Her fingers clawed, fighting the wind and the surge of power surrounding her. Her nails dug into his arms. Blood the wrong color pooled and slowly dripped, running down her fingers, along her palm, to her wrist before falling, falling, falling to the rich earth below.

Mike stared at her, his eyes widening in horror. He'd felt what she did, what her magick made directly behind him.

Her shadow hands gripped Mike's shell and yanked. Hard and fierce, dragging him toward the gate he'd opened.

A single sound. A piercing, inhuman, unearthly scream.

And then absolute silence.

Paige fell to the ground. The bright blue sky greeted her, the slight breeze dancing upon her skin. Mike was gone. Where? She had no clue, nor did she really care.

Holy shit. She'd done it. She'd actually done it.

Holy shit, she hurt.

Chapter 57

Paige lay on the ground, spent. After all the worrying, all she'd had to do was send him back nearly the same way she would a demon. She really needed to get into magickal shape. She couldn't afford to be taken so off guard again. Ever.

For now, though? She turned her head, scanning the grass. She should have the key.

Lucius picked himself up, his arms out as he took stock of himself. With a frown, he stooped, retrieving a broken, dull green something from the ground, and then stood. "The key."

She breathed a sigh of relief. She really needed to get up, but it felt good to lie there for a second. The pain receded, the burning scar the last to feel normal. "Lucius, would you do me a favor?"

He met her gaze, his fingers folding around the knotwork key.

All she wanted to do was close her eyes and fall asleep for a year. "Take Fanny back to town and make sure she's safe."

"I'm not a messenger and I'm not a delivery boy."

"I just saved your life from being sucked into that key. Today, you're a messenger and a delivery boy."

He opened his hand. "We have to find a way to retrieve my brethren from it."

"If we can." She swallowed, raising her palm. "Can I see it? Maybe I can think of something. When my brain is on fire, of course."

He licked his lips.

She flicked her fingers, beckoning. "Give it to me and I'll protect it. Make sure it's safe."

"You're not even able to stand, love. I don't believe you're quite

capable yet."

She released a breath and pushed herself to her feet, immediately wishing she'd gone slower as her stomach rolled, threatening to spill. "I'll take it home. Grandma could have an idea, too."

"To the Whiskey house?"

She nodded.

He released a breath and handed it over. "My brethren. This is a responsibility not to be taken lightly."

"As soon as I figure out how, I will release them from the key."

He spun on his heel, disappearing into the barn.

She groaned pressing a hand to her head. Her gaze went to the blackness of the door to the barn. "Responsibility. Yeah. Because you did a bang up job, right?"

"Pea."

She jerked. "Bal. Crap. You scared me."

Balnore had appeared near Jackie's shining hood. He surveyed the area. "I take it we won?"

"Surprisingly, yes." She held up the key.

"Mike?"

She shrugged deeply. "Other side of the gate."

"Interesting."

"Thanks for the support."

He gestured with his hands. "I have faith in you, Pea. It's not blind, though."

"Confidence." She took a step toward Jackie and paused as her hip complained. Getting old sucked. How the hell had she hurt her hip? "How's Dexx?"

"Not good." Balnore shifted to the side, making room for her on the hood. "He's not healing and he appears to be getting worse. Do you have everything taken care of here?"

“Lucius is taking care of Fanny. I have the key. It’s time to get out of here.”

“And the other demons?”

“I think once they realize I have the key, they’ll leave.”

“Problem solves itself.”

“Sometimes, the easiest solution is best.”

“It’s not my favorite.”

“Nor mine.” She opted to not rest on the hood. If she did, she was afraid she wouldn’t get back up. “But I can’t deal with them. I’ve already gone through Lucius and Roxxie as shields. That leaves me with Xael, and I’m not ready for that.”

Balnore’s head bobbed up and down as he studied the barn. “Things are as buttoned up here as you can make it.”

“There’s still too many loose ends, but, Bal, I’m not leaving without Dexx.”

He leveled a hard look at her. “He… he may not make it home. He’s in critical condition. The doctors say he won’t survive the night. I’m sorry, Peanut.”

Paige stared up at the sun high overhead and let the information settle over her. She pressed the fingertips of her empty hand against one eyelid, her heart clenching. “Will you drive me to him? Please. I can’t. I need sleep.”

Balnore gripped her arm. “You do,” he said, his voice a quiet murmur. “Fine. You see him. You say your goodbyes, then we get you and that key to Highland Park and inside that fortress Alma calls a home.”

“Agreed.”

Paige remembered getting into the car after placing the key in her pocket. The next thing she knew, the car was still and Balnore’s hand was nudging her awake. “We’re here, Peanut.”

She breathed, feeding oxygen into her brain, willing it to wake up. If

she were really, really lucky, Sven wouldn't try anything, and the demon population in and around St. Francisville would disappear.

If only she were that lucky. The door opened and Balnore helped her through the lobby to the elevator.

They exited the elevator on the third floor. Few people walked the wide, bright hall. A woman's voice called over the intercom, paging a doctor to a room. Otherwise, she couldn't see or hear anyone.

Balnore led the way to a glass-enclosed room with a single bed.

Paige's breath lodged in her throat. It was so cold. Dexx laid there, tubes and wires coming from his body. Machines beeped all around him, and a single fluorescent light shone down from the wall above his headboard.

Balnore pressed his arm to hers, giving her support or a nudge of solidarity. "Are you ready for this?"

The thought of facing her future without Dexx in it? He'd become a partner she'd never realized she'd needed, a best friend she could tell almost anything to. She shook her head. "When he came here, he was fine."

"He was." Balnore released a sigh and stepped closer to the bed. "He was talking one moment. I left the room—I was pushed out, actually, and then he flatlined. He's been in a coma ever since."

Paige couldn't wrap her mind around the fact that Dexx might disappear from her life. For good. Forever.

"I'm—" Balnore paused, clasping his hands in front of him. "I'm going to give you some time."

Paige didn't hear him leave. He could have evaporated, traveling however demons did, or he could have simply stepped quietly out of the room. She didn't know. Didn't care.

Dexx was…gone.

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. She was afraid to touch him,

though she didn't know why. Nothing she could do would hurt him.

How was she supposed to say goodbye?

Easy. Just say it. Then walk away.

If only she didn't care about him. What would it be like to wake up alone? Or to jump into another situation like this one without him as backup? She felt stronger, more confident, more capable with him in her life.

She ran the palm of her hand along his arm. "We never had that epic sex, you know. Seems like a cop-out, you leaving like this." She didn't really feel the humor. She didn't want to joke around. She wanted to bring him back. She wanted to talk to him, to touch him, to hear him laugh, to have him make fun of her.

A glint caught her eye under the sleeve of his gown. Something white and stark. Raising the sleeve further, she saw a handprint.

Licking her lips, she touched it.

Sven. His name, his purpose, swarmed over her.

Paige.

His voice echoed through her mind.

I can bring him back. Our dance can continue.

Her heart paused in its beating.

For a price. Meet me in the courtyard.

Paige knew she shouldn't consider any offer he might provide. Dexx wouldn't appreciate knowing that she'd traded—what? Her soul? Her life? Her…what would she be willing to trade for one more moment with Dexx? Not her life. No. She liked him well enough, but her life? When she *knew* she had to live for Leah? No. She didn't have that luxury.

She'd at least see what Sven wanted. What was the harm in listening?

A great deal, actually.

Paige took the main doors outside and walked around, looking for the

courtyard. She found it. Or at least she thought she did. A group of young, flowering trees huddled within a concrete circle in the bay of three buildings.

"Sven?" she whispered. She wiped her damp palms on her jeans.

A shadow of a man headed toward her from the parking lot, his gait confident. He smiled as he grew closer. "I'm so glad you got my message."

"Did you do something to him? Are you the reason he's dying?"

"Gave him a virus." Sven chuckled, well-pleased with himself. "A plague, if you will."

"Why? What was the point of that?"

"Oh, if only you could see the big picture. You're bloody brilliant, you know. You really are, but I gotta say, you're well off your game this time around."

Paige licked her lips. She wasn't really interested in the big picture. She wanted to get Dexx, the key, and get the hell out of there. "I can tell you where Lucius is."

Sven smiled, saying nothing.

"Save Dexx. Take back whatever you did and I'll give you Lucius."

Sven took Paige's arm and led her to the bench, pushing her gently towards it. "You're scared of *me,* little 'ol *me?* That's kind of flattering, actually. I didn't really mean for all that. To get your attention? Yes. But this desperation? No."

"You gave him a plague and you didn't want me to be desperate?"

"Well, when you say it like that. Maybe I did. But not on a thinking level." He sat next to her.

She scooted away from him. "What do you want?"

He searched her eyes for a long moment. He blinked and leaned back. "You really are off your game, aren't you? You're near done in, and that's not what I need. Not at all."

“Sven.” She dropped her head into a hand. “Tell me what you want.”

“You, of course.”

She frowned at him. “As what? A lover? An adversary?”

“Oh, this—” He sighed. “This will never do. What do you need to be patched up? I need you healed, on your toes. We’ve things to do, you and I, and we can’t do that with you this close to knacking your face.”

“I want Dexx back.”

“Ah, yes. He is quite the partner, isn’t he? Lover?”

She flinched.

“Not quite. Excellent. Well, I look forward to that one. But another time. Yes. Fine. But first, I have to pay a visit to a certain angel to retrieve a certain artifact. I’ll try to keep it from being bloody. I want you home and rested. And not Denver. Really. Move back home. It’s where you’re strongest, and we need you strong.”

For what? “Do I even ask who *we* are? Do you know I have the key?”

Sven tipped his blond head to the side. “What?”

“I sent Mike back and took the key.”

He chuckled, biting his bottom lip. “Why, you do so surprise me. Oh, Paige. You’re quite the dear.”

Paige pulled the mangled piece of broken metal from her pocket. “Why do you want this?”

He shifted his focus from the key to her face. “I don’t want to open the gate, if that’s what you’re askin’. I was interested to see what Mike’s plan was. I mean, after all, the angels had gone to an awful lot of trouble to kill off all the guardians and myself to get their hands on that.”

Paige swallowed.

“How will you protect it? You can’t just bury it in the backyard.”

“At Grandma’s. She can make wards. She’s strong.”

“Ah. Wise choice.” He ran his tongue along the inside of his cheek for

a moment. “Let me offer my protection instead.”

Paige frowned. “Why would I trust you?”

“Think about it, Paige. Alma has children who live in that fortress. There’ll be more very soon. The key brings the kinds of people she can’t beat. Not on her own. Are you moving back? No? Didn’t think so. Besides, even if you did, you’re broken, what with that sigil on your chest?”

“What is this?” She gestured to her scar. “I know it’s a scar. I know it makes demons want to possess me.”

His eyes softened. “Not my idea, unfortunately. Though, I must say, I’m not opposed to the result. Learn to work around it.”

Work around it? She couldn’t even conceive how that was possible.

Sven held his hand out. “Give me the key and I’ll protect it.”

“And Lucius? What do you want with him?”

“To talk. I have questions for him.”

Paige glanced down at the key, turning it slightly to catch the overhead sunlight. “All that just to talk to a half-demon like you? This has been… the absolute worst case on record. You and your friends running around like homicidal children… *for questions*? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’ll even clean up the demons in St. Francisville for you.”

“You killed innocent people.”

“To—” He released a breath. “I see now that what I did was wrong. You weren’t ready. You will be.”

“So I can expect more dead bodies?”

“Would you prefer something else?”

“I’d prefer to be left alone.”

He frowned at her. “I’ll do something else for you instead. I’ll give you back your lover, and I’ll bring you back your daughter.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Bullshit.”

“I’ve never lied to you, lover. I have been as direct as I can be without introductions. I have done as my code led me. But you need more proof. Your hunter and your daughter. They’re both needed. I just didn’t realize it till now. Didn’t put the pieces together. Hand the key to me for safekeeping and go to your hunter.”

Her fingers flexed around the metal.

“And then heal. Practice. Something big’s comin’. Bigger’n what I brought to you. Beef it up a bit. With you at my side… oh, the things we’ll do.”

She really wanted to get out of there. “You won’t open the gate.”

“No.” He raised his eyebrows, the corners of his eyes drawing down. “No. I absolutely will not do that.”

“And there won’t be any more killings.”

He winced. “In St. Francisville? No. Not…yet.”

She needed to buy time. Time to regroup, to get tougher, smarter, play harder. She dropped the key in the palm of his hand.

He folded his fingers around it and rose. “Go to him. You’ve won a reprieve, my pet. Take it.”

Paige watched him leave the same way he’d arrived. A reprieve? Why didn’t that sound good?

Chapter 58

By the time Paige made it back to his hospital room, Dexx was sitting up in bed, an army of nurses surrounding him. She paused at the door, hugging herself. Had she made the right decision? She let him entertain the staff with his wisecracks and flirtatious smiles. She didn't want him to hate her just yet.

She pulled her phone out of her pocket and searched through her recent calls list.

"White."

"Whiskey. Have there been any more… *problems*?"

She heard several people around him, almost like a party. "No. It's pretty quiet. Did you fix it? Are we safe?"

She rubbed her forehead with her thumb and forefinger. "I hope so. I don't know."

His voice barely carried from the other end. "I need something stronger than that, Paige. *Is it done*?"

She let her head fall against the doorframe. "For now. I bought some time, but it's impossible to say how much."

"Okay. I guess we'll take what we can get." The call ended, and she turned the screen off.

Paige leaned against the doorframe watching Dexx soak up the attention men always seemed to get when were sick. She let him have his moment.

Dexx was released to light duty, and for two days, Paige and Dexx watched as death notices were served, and funeral notices came out. St. Francisville had definitely suffered more than its share of carnage for a small place. The upside was that things were indeed calm. Paige felt the

calm cover the area like a blanket. The streets stayed clear, but the sidewalks had more activity.

Good. People were a little more appreciative than they had been.

"Where's Lucius?" Dexx asked as he guided her into the little diner with the fifties flare.

"Disappeared, probably going after the key and his brethren. I mean, I get it, I understand, but his brothers aren't my main responsibility. I hope he finds them and just… stays away."

"Yeah. Me too. I'm on the fence about him, and if I never see him again, I won't have to send him back."

Dexx lifted his chin to the waitress and pulled Paige along in her wake.

"Hungry?"

"For a burger from the fifties? You bet."

"How do you *eat all the time?"*

Dexx's grin grew wide. "Clean living."

Paige shook her head as the waitress set ice water on the table. "What'll ya'll have?"

"I'm going to need about the biggest burger you got, with super greasy fries and *all* the salt. Pea? You going to have something?"

"I'd really love a chicken sandwich."

The waitress nodded with a smile. "You got it. Comin' right up."

Dexx waited with all the patience of an eight-year-old on Christmas. Soon the steaming burger and the chicken sandwich arrived with a smile for Dexx and a flat stare for Paige. That made her own smile larger, with a slightly feral twist to it.

Dexx dug in with abandon. His first bite dripped grease along his chin.

"You're worse than an animal. You're like a child."

Dexx nodded behind his burger.

Paige's phone rang. Her boss in Denver. If he was calling her, it probably wasn't good. She swiped open the call.

Her boss wasn't too happy with her extended leave of absence. "Are you planning on returning sometime this year, Whiskey?"

She pulled the phone away from her ear momentarily, lowering the volume. Everyone in the diner could have heard him. "Yes, sir. I should be back in Denver by tomorrow—"

"Uh, probably Wednesday," Dexx said around a mouthful of hamburger bouncing slightly in the aqua-colored bench in the diner. "We're driving."

Paige shook her head.

"Who was that?" her boss demanded.

"No one, sir. There's still a few things I have to wrap up here. I should be back in a couple of days."

"You might not have a job to come back to."

The line went silent.

Paige cringed and placed her phone face down on the table.

"That conversation didn't go well. Thinking about freelance work yet?" Dexx shoved another three fries in his mouth. "It'd make things a lot easier."

It might, but there was something about protecting people she would never be able to give up. "Didn't they feed you in the hospital?"

"That's a joke, right? Hospital food should be labeled *not fit for human consumption* on every tray."

She raised an eyebrow and pulled the lettuce from her chicken sandwich.

"So, where's the key?" He stabbed a fry in ketchup. "We've been vamping for two days. No demons, explosions, or zombie love notes anywhere. What's the plan to get it back?"

She released a tight breath. For two days, she'd done nothing but

think of what to tell him. Should she admit to the truth? What would that do? “It was destroyed. When I sent Mike back through the gate.”

“Really.” A fry paused on its way to his mouth. His eyes locked on hers, waiting.

“Yeah.” She pulled the top bun from the sandwich and set it on the plate. She turned her head and stared out the big window, watching traffic pass on the highway. “I think we’re safe for now.”

“And Lucius?”

“He’s searching for the key. He thinks he can get it back. Try to get the other guardians out of it.”

Dexx narrowed his eyes at her, setting his burger down. “Sven?”

She shrugged.

“And you don’t care?”

“Look.” She gestured with her hand. “We solved the case, like I was supposed to. The killings stopped, and we managed to keep the gate shut. Case closed. Now, I get to write a report more fiction than fact.”

“Why do I get the feeling there’s more here than you’re telling?”

“I don’t know. Really. I don’t.”

A shadow fell across the table. “Can I sit?”

She looked up to find Brian standing at the table. Paige scooted in to give him room.

Brian sat, perched on the very edge. He grimaced, running his hand over his head. “So, the reports are written like you said.”

“Good.”

“Are you sure Sven is gone?”

Paige dipped her fingertip in the growing pool of condensation around the bottom of her glass of water. “Yeah.”

“Because it doesn’t make sense. What was the point of all the killings? Why did all those people have to die?”

She wished she knew, but Sven hadn’t shared that with her. “Gas

mains, and poor infrastructure. Big party and a failure in the main. Mixed with some forgotten chemicals, and it contaminated the air. Mass intoxication and some deaths. The vast majority of people will believe it because they want to."

"You're sure it's over?"

"Yeah. It's over. St. Francisville is safe again. I promise."

Brian closed his eyes for a long moment. "There aren't too many who actually know what you did for us."

Dexx shook his head, pulling his hands away from his fry-strewn plate. "Don't mention it. It's all in a day's work."

"We really appreciate it. *I* really appreciate it."

Paige smiled, hearing the "but."

"And I think I'd feel a lot better if you left."

Paige chuckled.

Brian tapped the table with his middle finger and stood up. "Tonight. I'd appreciate it if you left by tonight."

"Roger that, Chief. Do you need anything else on Malika's case?"

He stood up. "We have everything we need. She won't be going anywhere for a long time."

"Good."

Brian thumped the table and left.

Paige quirked her lips.

"That was the nicest, most polite get-the-fuck-out-of-my-town I've ever heard," Dexx said.

"Yeah." Paige pushed her plate away.

"Whatever happened to the FBI guy?"

"Special Agent Scott?"

Dexx leaned back, draping one elbow across the back of the booth. "Yeah. That one."

"He got called back to his office. The case is closed."

“That’s an odd one, though, don’t you think?” Dexx frowned. “Did you ever figure out what he is, why he sees people dying around you?”

“No.” She rubbed her bottom lip along her teeth in thought. “Whatever he is, I doubt that’s the last we see of him.”

“Yeah. Hey.”

She met his gaze.

“Tell me what you really did.”

“What do you mean?” Paige stirred the ice in her glass with her straw. “When?”

“I was in a coma. I was dying. What did you do? You tell me and I’ll tell you something.”

She pulled the corners of her lips down. “I didn’t do anything. You did that through the miracle of modern medicine.”

The look he gave her said he didn’t believe her. “Okay, I’ll tell you anyway. I had dreams. Not the ‘I’m flying type,’ or the ‘I’m naked in school’ type. No, this was weird, way beyond anything I’ve ever had. There was something in the dark, waiting. It called to me, but not with words, but like I was just drawn to it.”

Paige picked up her lidless sandwich and used the lettuce to make a top bun before taking a bite. Not bad for the fifties.

“But that wasn’t the worst part. It was like I was *looking* for it. Like a piece of me was missing and I’m supposed to get it back.” He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “And whatever it is, is like super-powerful. I’m talking John Force powerful. Way over my head kind of thing. But it was dark. All in the dark.”

She took another bite, but Dexx didn’t even *play* with his. His dream had him again.

“And it was so *big*. Like another world. And the thing that calling to me? It wasn’t just calling, it was *looking*. I guess the coma had me pretty messed up, but I didn’t see any light at the end of the tunnel. But there

was something there that I couldn't find. Not yet."

"Sounds like you were trying to work out the demon encounter. All of them. You're a hunter and that's not common even for witches. So I'm betting you're trying to ground yourself. It explains a lot, actually."

"Yeah. Maybe. But at least you destroyed the key, and Sven'll have to get his jollies another way."

Talking about the key might get too close to what she actually did. She needed to steer him off course. "Eat. So you didn't like the food there."

He chuckled around another bite. "Huh. Nope. You ever had any of that slop?"

"Which, by the way, how are you paying for it?"

Dexx smiled, his eyebrows raised high. "The hospital? You probably don't want to know."

"Hmm."

They finished in silence, the food actually tasty. The waitress came by and asked if they wanted dessert. "You know, I could use a milkshake. Chocolate."

"That sounds capital. I'll take one too."

Paige wiped her mouth and washed her food down with the ice water. "Did I hear you right? You're coming to Denver with me?"

Dexx shrugged with one shoulder. "You couldn't honestly think you're getting rid of me that easily?"

"I don't have a couch."

"You think you need one?"

Paige bowed her head. "This is stupid."

"Try getting rid of me, yes. Thinking you need a couch? Also yes. You got your own man-tiger here."

The shakes showed up and Dexx immediately began to pull the chocolate goodness up the straw.

She stared at his few straggling fries. He picked them off, one by one, each getting a dose of ketchup. “This is my faul—”

“Shut up.” Dexx threw down the last burned fry and set both hands on either side of his plate. “Placing blame isn’t going to help anyone. Anyone. Yeah. There’s a problem out there. Yeah. You need to figure out a way to handle it. But sitting there and shoving blame down your throat like poison pills helps no one.”

She released a frustrated breath. She knew what he said was true, but having the truth slammed in her face was a bit tough to swallow. “Such a drama queen.”

“Don’t make me punch you in the face and lick your nose.”

A surprised chuckle escaped her. “What?”

He gave her a lopsided grin.

“How am I supposed to do that?”

Dexx shrugged, clenching his hand. “We’ll find a way. It might be a good idea to go home.”

“That’s what we’re doing. Tonight, before midnight.”

“No, dumbass.” His eyes were soft as he rebuked her. “To Texas. To Alma.” He scraped his last fry through the glop of ketchup and popped it in his mouth. The shake got another healthy pull.

“I’m not ready.”

“Well,” he said with a sigh, “you might want to brace yourself for it. Because that might be exactly what you need to get ready for. You’re awake now, Pea. You could use all the help you could get.”

“I don’t know if I need that kind of help.”

“Alma. You couldn’t use that kind of help?”

After what she’d done? No. “Sven got away.” She pushed her milkshake sitting beside her water. “And he has a plan. A big one. I have no idea what it is.”

“He’s a slippery bastard.”

If only he knew.

“Oh, we’ll catch him. You got the hook in him now. He’ll follow you around like a lost puppy.”

Paige nodded and raised her milkshake. “To catching the bad guy.”

He picked up his and clanked it against her glass. “And sending him back to Hell.”

Where he belonged.

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About Author

F.J. Blooding lives in hard-as-nails Alaska growing grey hair in the midnight sun with Shane, her writing partner and husband, their two kids, his BrotherTwin, SistaWitch, TeenMan, and SnarkGirl, along with a small menagerie of animals which includes several cats, an army of chickens, a rabbit or two, but and three dogs.

She enjoys writing and creating with her wonderful husband, and is finally running an electrical contracting business. She's dated vampires, werewolves, sorcerers, weapons smugglers, U.S. Government assassins, and slingshot terrorists. No. She is *not* kidding. She even married one of them.

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